

Matching in Rhymes and Reality: Poetic Communication between Four Couples in Late
Imperial China

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Abstract

My dissertation explores marital relationships represented in poetic exchanges between educated husbands and wives and the role of poetry in the marital relationships of four literary couples from seventeenth- to mid-nineteenth century China: Ye Shaoyuan and Shen Yixiu, Chen Zhilin and Xu Can, Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan, and Aixinjueluo Yihui and Gu Taiqing. Drawing mainly from their collected works, I argue that the virtuous and talented images of gentry wives are shaped by both women themselves and their literati husbands, not just the efforts from the former. Within poetic dialogues, they also express voices deviating from traditional expectations of restraint and obedience. My close reading of a small selection of exceptional cases reveals that both virtues and *qing* had equivalent weight in their marriages. Instead of serving as mirrors of conjugal life, the poems were products of shared activities of reading and composition that strengthened the relationships between couples. Placing their marital relationships into a larger context of extended family and close social circle, I find that companionate relationship displays a quality of ambiguity. On the one hand, literary couples and their coterie applaud deep affection as well as harmony between poet husbands and wives, but they at the same time feel anxiety about exposing intimacy between spouses to public and contradictions with the existed familial hierarchy, on the other.

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Introduction

A poem by a high Qing literati, Shu Wei 舒位 (1765–1816), recording an interesting anecdote between one of his friends, Sun Yuanxiang 孫原湘 (1760–1829), and Sun’s wife provides a good example of poetic communication between a literary couple. Shu composed a verse about his experience reading Sun’s work; he narrates the situation in the long title:

Sun Zixiao [i.e. Yuanxiang] composed a poem in which he called himself “an old man.” Beside this term, there were smaller words correcting it to “a poet,” and penned by his wife, Madam Daohua [i.e. Xi Peilan] 孫子瀟作詩自稱老夫，旁有細書改為詩人，則其內史道華夫人筆也。¹

This title already reads like a short story that fully represents a sweet moment for the couple. In the poem, Shu praises and comments on the relationship. The poem reads:

相應如雙鳥，舉案孟光賢。 . . .
 The couple matches each other just like a pair of birds;
 The wife is as worthy as Meng Guang, who lifted a small table.² . . .
 夫人顧靦然，恆言不稱老。
 Madam looks at the poem and smiles.
 A common saying goes, “Do not call yourself an old man,”³

¹ Shu Wei, “Sun Zixiao zuoshi zicheng laofu, pang you xishu gai wei shiren. Ze qi neishi Daohua furen ye,” in *Pingshuizhai shiji* 餅水齋詩集, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), vol. 1487, *juan* 11, p. 22.

² Meng Guang, married to Liang Hong 梁鴻, from the same county, was ugly but virtuous. In her hometown, many men asked to marry her, but she never consented. Until she was thirty years old, her parents would ask what she wanted, and she would reply that she would like to wed someone with great moral integrity, like Liang Hong. At that time, Liang had not yet married and also refused requests from many elite families. Liang heard of Meng’s hope and decided to marry her. After they were married, Meng would always lift a small table up to line up with her eyebrows during meals to avoid looking straight at her husband. She also urged Liang to be a recluse. Afterwards, not only does Meng Guang become the epitome of the virtuous wife, but this image of lifting the small table came to serve as an allusion to marital harmony. See Fan Ye 范曄, “Liang Hong zhuan” 梁鴻傳, *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), pp. 2766–67.

³ This term is from the *Liji* 禮記. Confucius says that when one’s parents are still alive, one should never call oneself as an elder in front of them, in order not to hurt their feelings. Here the author generalizes this to the circumstance of a wife who does not like her husband refers himself as decrepit. See Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849), ed., *Liji zhushu* 禮記注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Taipei: Yiwen

舉筆乙其處. . . .

She raises the brush to correct the poem at that place. . . .

婦言自可聽, 轉注唱考老.

The words of a wife can certainly be listened to.

They apply the principle of “shifting and annotation” to singing in harmony about “kao” and “lao.”⁴

The poem astutely captures the essence of spousal interaction and poetic dialogue between a cultured couple. They not only express their affection by means of poetic composition but also engage in intellectual discussion within their exchanges. Additionally, as an outsider to the relationship, Shu Wei provides the viewpoint of a contemporary. At the same time, the discrepancy between the epitomic wifely virtues and the intimacy and equality the couple shares in their literary creations are also directly displayed in the very first couplet. On the one hand, a pair of birds serves as an analogy that they are perfectly equal in their harmonious singing, while Shu Wei shows a certain respect for the opinions of a woman. On the other hand, the ideal gender norm imposed on a gentry wife was to serve her husband in a submissive manner; “lifting the table” suggests her inequality and inferior.

The sketch by Shu Wei presents the bright side of a harmonious spousal interaction; however, it also raises other questions about the relationship. For example, how would a literary couple interact with each other in their own poetic works? What role might a close friend play in this kind of marital relationship? What relationship would an educated couple have with the other members of its social circle? In these regards, do Sun

yinshuguan, 1960), vol. 5, p. 868a.

⁴ “Zhuanzhu” 轉注 (shifted and annotated) is one of the principles of making Chinese characters categorized by Shu Shen 許慎 (ca. 58–ca. 147). The definition Shu gave is of two characters of this type the belong to the same radical and can be mutually annotated and explained. The example that Shu provided is of “kao” 考 and “lao” 老,” which both mean old age.

and his wife represent a typical or unique case?

Records of marital relationships in premodern China can be found in various sources—legal documents, biographies in works of history and gazetteers, epitaphs, and poetry. From these kinds of materials, we can discover broken relationships as well as the extreme devotion and sacrifice in matrimony that are mentioned in narratives of exemplary women. However, as in the instance above, literati poetry could showcase other dimensions than adultery, shrewishness, and martyrdom. This dissertation aims to explore the marital relationships described and performed in the poetry and the functioning of poetic exchanges in marriage.

In the *Liji* 禮記 (Records of Rituals), marriage and wedding ceremonies are characterized as the “joining in amity of two surnames” 將合兩姓之好.⁵ Clearly, this shows that marriage was a matter of two families, and not merely a joining of two individuals. Based on this, the purposes of matrimony were closely associated with family duties: the rituals of worshiping ancestors entailed cooperation of a couple in bearing offspring to continue the family line and getting the woman to assume the role of helpmate to deal with domestic affairs.⁶ The idea of being responsible for the work of the household was indicated by the original meanings of the two common words referring to wife: “qi” 妻 and “fu” 婦. Via their shapes, these words signify, in the first case, a woman carrying objects, and in the latter, a woman using a broom in cleaning. In addition, exegesis of the meaning of “fu” in the *Da Dai Liji* 大戴禮記 (Records of Rituals Edited by the Elder Dai) further indicates that a woman should be obedient to

⁵ See Sun Xidan 孫希旦 (1736–84), annot., *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, eds. Shen Xiaohuan 沈嘯寰 and Wang Xingxian 王星賢 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), p. 1416.

⁶ Chen Peng 陳鵬, *Zhongguo hunyin shi gao* 中國婚姻史稿 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), pp. 5–13.

men and accordingly not have the right to dominate.⁷ The most prominent woman scholar in Chinese history, Ban Zhao 班昭 (ca. 45–ca. 117), reinforced and canonized this concept in the doctrines for women at the time of marriage; Ban extolled women's work as one of womanly virtues. As is evident in many verses in the following chapters, this ideology continues to as late as the Qing dynasty.

Furthermore, the patriarchy and the need to have more male descendants brought about concubinage. Also, many dynasties, including the Ming and the Qing, dictated in their marital laws that a man could only have one primary wife; thus, Chinese polygamy did not permit two wives of equivalent status, though it did allow a man to have multiple concubines.⁸ Concubines had roughly the status of property belonging to their husband.

Beginning in the Han dynasty, gender ideologies legislating women's subordinate position and the standards of woman's virtues were first theorized by means of the explication of the Classics on rituals and monographs designed for women's education. Women's mobility as well as speech were also greatly restricted inside the household by the gender norms of the time, while the concept of chastity was promoted by Liu Xiang in his *Biographies of Exemplar Women*.⁹ These ideas remained powerful until the late Qing period when the ideology of chastity was consolidated after the Song Dynasty due to the rise and prevalence of the Neo-Confucianism. Official policy in the Ming and the Qing eras highly valued women's chastity.

Even though in the late imperial period there was tighter control of women, women

⁷ See Dai De 戴德 (43 B.C.E.–33 B.C.E.), *Da Dai liji jiegou* 大戴禮記解詁, annot. Wang Pinzhen 王聘珍, ed. Wang Wenjin 王文錦 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 254.

⁸ Wang Fenling 汪玢玲, *Zhongguo hunyin shi* 中國婚姻史 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2001).

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 101–106.

at the same time enjoyed some greater freedoms than their predecessors. As historians have noted, the particular socio-economic factors and cultural atmosphere, namely the emergence of a monetary economy and a publishing boom, in the Jiangnan region between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries raised literacy among gentry women and nurtured numerous women authors as well as a distinct “women’s culture.”¹⁰ Based on this, scholars have shown that Ming and Qing women writers attained a certain agency as well as achievements in literary creation,¹¹ and, along with this, a certain amount of cultural capital.¹² The increase in the number of women poets contributed to making what modern scholars call “companionate marriage,” which refers to a cultured husband and wife who share literary interests, more possible. As such relationships became more common, through examples in literature and sometimes in real life, finding a spouse with the same interests and level of talent became an ideal that talented women desired for in their marriages.¹³ Parents became more willing to look for literate matches in daughters-in-law, partly for the sake of the education of their descendants.¹⁴ Men, for their part,

¹⁰ See Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in the Seventeen-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 4–5; Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

¹¹ See Zhong Huiling 鍾慧玲, *Qingdai nüshiren yanjiu* 清代女詩人研究 (Taipei: Liren shuju, 2000); Wang Lijian 王力堅, *Qingdai caiyuan wenxue zhi wenhua kaocha* 清代才媛文學之文化考察 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 2006); Zhang Hongsheng 張宏生 and Zhang Yan 張雁, eds., *Gudai nüshiren yanjiu* 古代女詩人研究 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002). In English-language research, there are two ground-breaking translations: Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, eds., *Chinese Women Poets: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism from Ancient Times to 1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, eds. and trans., *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004). For essays, there are two significant article collections: Kang-i Sun Chang and Ellen Widmer, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); and *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

¹² See, Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 76–143; Grace S. Fong, *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency and Writing in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008); Grace Fong, “Signifying Bodies: The Significance of Suicide Writings by Women in Ming Qing China,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 3.1 (2001): 105–42.

¹³ For more details, see Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, pp. 183–85.

¹⁴ Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, p. 132.

would tend to select as concubines who were conversant with certain art forms, such as poetry, singing, or painting.¹⁵

Also, at the same time, as many scholars have observed, unlike their counterparts in previous periods such as Li Qingzhao 李清照 (b. 1084) and Guan Daosheng 管道昇 (1262–1319), talented women poets in Ming and Qing times were not at all an isolated phenomenon. Some contemporary women writers would found communities through literary activities such as poetry societies and compilations of poetic anthologies.¹⁶ Nonetheless, owing to the social norms of gender division, men played a significant role in forging these women's societies, particularly in, to use Dorothy Ko's term, "social and public communities."¹⁷ Through male relatives' introductions and efforts, women authors were able to meet each other and in addition publish their works. Also, a few celebrated male literati, such as Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–97) and Chen Wenshu 陳文述 (1771–1843), accepted female disciples who then formed groups of women writers.¹⁸

Consequently, unlike their predecessors, Ming and Qing gentry women writers did, to certain extent, have public social lives; however, due to the prevailing social norms and inconvenient transportation at that time, by and large they were still confined to domestic

¹⁵ Ellen Johnston Liang, "Women Painters in Traditional China," in Marsha Weidner, ed., *Flowering in Shadows: Women in the History of Chinese and Japanese Painting* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), pp. 83–87.

¹⁶ See Grace Fong, *Herself an Author*, pp. 121–58; Ellen Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talents in Seventeenth-Century China," *Late Imperial China* 10.2 (Dec. 1989): 1–43.

¹⁷ For more details, see Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, pp. 219–93.

¹⁸ See Jerry Schmidt, "The Golden Age of Classical Women's Poetry in China: Yuan Mei (1716–97) and His Female Disciples," *China Report* 40.3 (Sep. 2004): 241–57; Wang Yingzhi 王英志, "Suiyuan 'guizhong san da zhiji' lunlue" 隨園"閨中三大知己" 論略, *Wenxue yichan* 文學遺產 1995.4 (1995): 101–12; Kang Zhangguo 康正果, "Fanwen he fanqing: Chen Wenshu de shiwen huodong ji qita" 泛文和泛情: 陳文述的詩文活動及其他, in Zhang Hongsheng, ed., *Ming Qing wenxue yu xingbie yanjiu* 明清文學與性別研究 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2002), pp. 727–63; Zhong Huiling, "Chen Wenshu yu Bicheng xianguan nüdizi de wenxue huodong" 陳文述與碧城仙館女弟子的文學活動, in *Ming Qing wenxue yu xingbie yanjiu*, pp. 764–800.

space. Communications with relatives, friends, and masters had to rely heavily on letters. Consequently, gentry women had tighter and closer connections with members of their husbands' families than with poetic friends or masters outside of their households. As Ellen Widmer has pointed out, since male masters' influences on women writers were often nominal, male relatives, particularly their husbands, actually wielded more influence on them, as well as providing them with support.¹⁹

Thanks to the spread of literacy among gentry women and resulting trend of companionate marriage, poetic exchanges open a window for us to examine how married literary couples expressed their affection to each other. An educated woman could realistically aspire to be not only her husband's partner in daily life, but also his literary accomplice, frequently exchanging poems. This dissertation selects four pairs of couples—Ye Shaoyuan 葉紹袁 (1589–1648) and Shen Yixiu 沈宜修 (1590–1635), Chen Zhilin 陳之遴 (1605–66) and Xu Can 徐燦 (1617–98),²⁰ Sun Yuanxiang 孫原湘 (1762–1829) and Xi Peilan 席佩蘭 (1762–after 1831),²¹ and Aixinjueluo Yihui 愛新覺羅奕繪 (1799–1838) and Gu Taiqing 顧太清 (1799–1877)—to analyze the gender relationships manifested in their works addressing each other. Through examining their poems presented to their spouses and their *changhe* 唱和 poems (poems composed in matching rhymes), I will reveal perspectives on the contemporary husband and wife relationship that are not apparent in other materials.

¹⁹ For more details, see Ellen Widmer, “The Epistolary World of Female Talents in Seventeenth-Century China,” 32–34.

²⁰ Zhao Xuepei 趙雪沛, “Guanyu nüciren Xu Can shengzu'nian ji wannian shenghuo de kaobian” 關於女詞人徐燦生卒年及晚年生活的考辨, *Wenxue yichan* 文學遺產 2004.3 (2004): 95–100.

²¹ Liu Shu 劉姝, “Qingdai shiren Sun Yuanxiang, Xi Peilan shengzu'nian kaobian” 清代詩人孫原湘, 席佩蘭生卒年考辨, *Shanghai daxue xuedao (shehui kexueban)* 上海大學學報 (社會科學版) 11.6 (Nov. 2004): 43–45.

This thesis explores husband and wife dialogues and gender relationships represented in poetic exchanges. I would like to include the voices of men as well as women, to reconstruct the communicative network. Scholars have endeavored to discover self-images of women writers as constructed in their works. Yet, gender relationships are never a one-sided movement but always a two-sided dynamic. This study attempts to analyze the voices of both husbands and wives. The major questions that I focus on include how women writers constructed their own images in poems presented to their husbands, how male poets depicted their wives, and how these depictions shaped each other. Based on these images, I hope to show different facets of the conjugal life of women authors in their poetic works. In addition, their descriptions display the relationships of literary couples in familial contexts and from the viewpoint of those in their coterie. Their poetic exchanges show that in their marriages both virtues and *qing* had equivalent weight. Instead of serving as mirrors of conjugal life, the poems were products of shared activities of reading and composition that strengthened the relationships between couples.

Additionally, current research in this field has mainly paid attention to one or the other side of the spectrum, namely individual poets, including their agency and self-construction, on the one hand, and female communities, both physical and imaginary, on the other. This study will focus on the husband-wife dyad in between the two poles of individual and community. Also, given its intermediate position between the individual and the community, husband-wife poetic communication can shed new light on both individual image-construction and women's and mixed gender communities.

The similarities and differences between different time periods, namely the late Ming and High Qing (1683-1839) periods, is another question that this dissertation will

explore. Dorothy Ko highlights the position of the cult of *qing* 情 within women's culture in the seventeenth century,²² while Susan Mann shows that beginning in the High Qing period, women writers began to emphasize their moral authority in their poetic works addressed to their husbands.²³ Close reading of some of the selected authors confirms Ko and Mann's arguments, though in some cases these readings will challenge the idea that High Qing women writers accentuated their virtues over their affection.

Choice of Poets

Since dialogues between husbands and wives form the core of this study, finding extant collected works was the central criterion used for narrowing down the pairs to those in the present selection. According to Hu Wenkai's 胡文楷 (ca. 1899–1988) influential reference book on traditional Chinese women writers and their works, there were over 3000 titles published during the Ming and Qing eras.²⁴ However, as Judith Zeitlin has acknowledged, due to various factors, including the custom among women of destroying their manuscripts as well as the inevitable damage over time,²⁵ the preservation and fragility of women poets' oeuvres have become critical issues. There has also been a series of events in recent centuries involving book destruction, such as the Taiping Rebellion and the Cultural Revolution. In other words, although there were a large number of women authors during the Ming and Qing periods, a huge disparity exists between the number of

²² Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, pp. 68–114.

²³ Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 94–120.

²⁴ The number is from Kang-i Sun Chang's calculation. See Kang-i Sun Chang, "Ming-Qing Women Poets and the Notions of 'Talents' and 'Morality,'" in *Culture and State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques*, eds. Theodore Hutters, R. Bin Wang, and Pauline Yu (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 236.

²⁵ See Judith Zeitlin, "Shared Dreams: The Story of *The Three Wives' Commentary on The Peony Pavilion*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54.1 (Jun 1994): 138–39.

women writers at that time and the surviving collections that can be accessed today. In addition, the completeness of extant collections often remains dubious. These factors have resulted in irreparable gaps in the reconstructions of authors' lives, circles, and thoughts. The same problem also affects the work of male authors, especially owing to the long general neglect in academia of Ming and Qing poetry, as well as the emphasis placed on women's works in the last twenty years.²⁶ There are even some cases in which talented women's corpses have survived, while their husbands' were lost.

Due to these limitations, the number of extant poems that relate to communications between couples has played a determining role in this study. For the sake of having a certain number of poems that reveal several dimensions of marital experience, I have selected spouses who have at least fifteen poems addressed to each other.

Additionally, in order to explore differences between periods, the selection of the targeted poets ranges from the last two decades of the late Ming era, when the two late Ming women writers included in this study were active in the literary arena, to the High Qing period and the Mid-Qing period (the Daoguang era, 1821–50).

In addition to the objective determinations mentioned above, the selected poetesses also expressed a great variety of content in their works. Although the selected poetesses generally belonged to the genteel class, in their works there are significant differences in their life experiences as well as in their personal interactions with their husbands. In terms of the intimacy manifested in the poems, they fall across the spectrum. Also, what their husbands underwent, such as exile or failure in the civil examination, affected the content

²⁶ See Kang-i Sun Chang, "Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women's Poetry and Their Selection Strategies," in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, eds. Kang-i Sun Chang and Ellen Widmer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 170.

of their poetic communications. In social status and ethnicity, they are also diverse. For example, Gu Taiqing, as a concubine in a Manchu aristocratic family, had experienced a quite distinct life from the other three women poets. Also, it is possible that her Manchu identity led her to display a more conservative attitude in her marital relationship compared with the other three ethnic Han writers.

Biographical Information

In this section, biographical information about the targeted four couples will be introduced in chronological order.

Ye Shaoyuan, whose courtesy name was Zhongshao 仲韶 and whose style name was Tianliao Daoren 天寥道人, was a native of Wujiang 吳江 in Jiangsu 江蘇. The Ye family belonged to the literary elite as all of its male members, including Ye Shaoyuan's grandfather and two younger brothers, obtained the *jinshi* degree. Ye Shaoyuan had been fond of literary composition since childhood; nevertheless, due to his mother's expectation, he was forced to spend a great deal of time preparing eight-legged essays for the civil examination. He finally passed the *jinshi* 進士 exam in 1626 and was appointed to several minor positions. Later, he resigned and returned to his hometown as a recluse. When Qing troops occupied Wujiang, Ye Shaoyuan fled with his three sons into the Gaoting Mountains in Hangzhou and became a monk. He died at sixty at his friend's place. Besides compiling *Wumengtang ji* 午夢堂集, the major collection comprising works Ye Shaoyuan and members of his family, he also left a self-compiled and annotated *nianpu* as well as a diary called *Jiaxing rizhu* 甲行日注, recording his life in the aftermath of the Ming-Qing

transition.²⁷

Ye's wife Shen Yixiu was also from a renowned literary family in Wujiang. Her father and four brothers all received the *jinshi* degree and were appointed official positions; one of her uncles was the celebrated playwright Shen Jing 沈璟 (1553–1610). It is easy to imagine that, with this family background, Shen Yixiu must have received an excellent education, and indeed she was already famous for her poetic talents when she was young. She married into the Ye family at fifteen. She had five daughters and eight sons, who were all conversant with poetry. According to her poems, due to the insistence of her mother-in-law, she did not in fact spend much time with her husband. They consequently relied heavily on poetic communication to express their affection. Shen Yixiu also frequently exchanged poems not only with Ye Shaoyuan, but also with her three talented daughters, forming a domestic poetic society. After losing her two daughters and sons, Shen pined away and died at forty-six. *Lichui* 鷓鴣吹, her collected poetic works and *Yirensi* 伊人思, a compilation of contemporary women's works by Shen, were both included in *Wumengtang ji*.²⁸

Both Chen Zhilin, whose courtesy names were Yansheng 彥昇 and Su'an 素庵, and Xu Can, whose courtesy name was Xiangping 湘蘋, hailed from renowned literary families in the lower Yangzi delta. Xu Can married Chen as his second wife after his first wife passed away at a young age.²⁹ Chen not only deemed Xu his “friend in the inner chamber” (*guizhongyou* 閨中友) but also praised Xu's poetic talents and indicated their

²⁷ Ye Shaoyuan, comp., *Wumengtang ji*, ed. Ji Qin 冀勤 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Chen Yuanlong 陳元龍 (1652–1736), “Jiazhuan” 家傳, in *Zhuozhengyuan shiji* 拙政園詩集 in *Baibu congshu jicheng* 百部叢書集成 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1968), 40.6: 1.

mutual appreciation in the preface he wrote for Xu's collection of *ci* 詞 (lyrics).³⁰ Chen Zhilin got his *jinshi* 進士 degree in 1637. After entering the bureaucratic system, his political career did not go smoothly at all. During the Ming-Qing dynastic transition, he was implicated by the sentence of his father, who was imprisoned and swallowed poison after failing to fight against the Qing troops. Chen lost his position and was banned from reappointment forever.³¹ In 1645, he surrendered to the Qing court. He eagerly grasped every opportunity for promotion, which often led to his entanglement in factional struggles.³² Chen's efforts sometimes did repay him as he expected. Yet, his eagerness also resulted in his being exiled twice in his lifetime; the second time, he was unable to return alive. Xu Can complied with Confucian norms in accompanying Chen Zhilin during his second exiles, and she transported his coffin home. After Chen's death, Xu devoted most of her time to Buddhism.³³ Chen had written a twelve-*juan* poetic collection entitled *Fuyun ji* 浮雲集, as well as *Xuanjitang ji* 旋吉堂集, *Fuyun xuji* 浮雲續集, and *Baiyi gao* 百一稿, but the latter three titles are not extant now.³⁴ Xu Can's two collections, *Zhuozhengyuan shiji* 拙政園詩集 and *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu* 拙政園詩餘, were both published by her descendants.

Like the two couples described above, Sun Yuanxiang, whose courtesy names were

³⁰ Chen Zhilin, "Preface to *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*" 拙政園詩餘序, in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu* 拙政園詩餘 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1968), pp. 1a–1b.

³¹ Deng Zhicheng 鄧之誠 (1887–1960), *Qingshi jishi chubian* 清詩紀事初編 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), p. 776.

³² For more details, see Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽 (1844–1927), *Qingshi gao* 清史稿 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), pp. 9635–36.

³³ Deng Zhicheng, *Qingshi jishi chubian*, p. 777; Zhao Xuepei, "Guanyu nüciren Xu Can shengzu'nian ji wannian shenghuo de kaobian," p. 100.

³⁴ Ke Yuchun 柯愈春, *Qingren shiwenji zongmu tiyao* 清人詩文集總目提要 (Beijing, Beijing guji, 2001), p. 357.

Zixiao 子瀟 and Changzhen 長真, and his wife Xi Peilan were from cultured family backgrounds in Changshu 常熟. Xi Peilan's original name was Ruizhu 蕊珠 and her courtesy names were Yunfen 韻芬, Huanyun 浣雲, and Daohua 道華; Peilan was her style name.³⁵ She completed her learning of *The Book of Odes* when she was around eight or nine, and her father then taught her with the collection of poems by her aunt.³⁶ Xi represented her fondness for poetry as an innate quality and said she felt uneasy when she could not place a single word neatly in a line.³⁷ Xi married into Sun's family when she was about sixteen. They not only frequently exchanged their poetic works; they also shared the same reading materials for their amusement in their inner chamber.³⁸ Sun even modestly attributed his poetic enlightenment to Xi Peilan.³⁹ In fact, he was famous as a poetic prodigy at the age of three. The fame he had acquired for his outstanding ability in poetry spread in Beijing when he was twenty after he had traveled back from Fengtian 奉天 (present-day Shenyang 瀋陽) and Shanxi 山西 with his father.⁴⁰ Later, through Sun's introduction, Xi joined Yuan Mei's 袁枚 (1716–97) camp of female disciples; in this way, they were both nominally Yuan's followers.⁴¹ Although from early on, Sun Yuanxiang had a reputation as a talented scholar, over twenty years passed from the first

³⁵ Shi Shuyi 施淑儀 (b. 1878), *Qingdai guige shiren zhenglue* 清代閨閣詩人徵略, in Zhou Junfu 周駿富 comp., *Qingdai zhuanji congkan* 清代傳記叢刊 (Taipei: Mingwen shuju, 1985), vol. 25, p. 313.

³⁶ Xi Peilan, "Biaoxiong Gu Yuan'an shoushu xiangumu *Lüchuang yigao* buxia shushiben, ze qi shuzhigongzhe lianzhui chengjuan, biansuo tiyong, jinzhi qihou" 表兄屈元安手書先姑母綠窗遺稿不下數十本, 擇其書之工者連綴成卷, 遍索題詠, 謹識其後, *Changzhen 'ge ji* 長真閣集, in *Qingdai shiwenji huibian* 清代詩文集彙編 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 464, p. 655.

³⁷ Xi Peilan, "Shizhong sanyou ge" 詩中三友歌, *Changzhen 'ge ji*, p. 668.

³⁸ Sun Yuanxiang, "Bingqi" 病起, *Tianzhange ji* 天真閣集, in *Qingdai shiwenji huibian* 清代詩文集彙編 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 464, p. 5.

³⁹ Sun Yuanxiang, "Preface" to *Tianzhange ji*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Wang Zhonghan 王鐘翰, ed., *Qingshi liechuan* 清史列傳 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), p. 5970.

⁴¹ David Hawkes, "His P'ei-Lan," *Asia Major*, new series 7, part1–2 (1959): 121.

time Sun took the civil exam until he formally passed it in 1805. However, Sun returned to his hometown before receiving an appointment, due to his illness. Afterwards, he made his living by lecturing in private academies and never again accepted an official position. Sun died at seventy and left a sixty-juan collection called *Tianzhen'ge ji* 天真閣集, published while he was still alive. Xi also apparently witnessed the publication of her poetry collection, *Changzhen'ge ji* 長真閣集.⁴²

Unlike the other spouses, Aixinjueluo Yihui and Gu Taiqing were from more prestigious backgrounds. Yihui, whose courtesy name as Zizhang 子章 and whose style name was Taisu Daoren 太素道人, was a member of the royal family; his grandfather was the fifth son of the Qianlong 乾隆 emperor. He therefore inherited the title of *Beile* 貝勒⁴³. As both his grandfather and father were conversant with literature and calligraphy, literary activities thrived in his family.⁴⁴ Hailing from this kind of background, Yihui became an erudite and prolific writer. However, it would be wrong to imagine Yihui as a mere literatus; for instance, there are many poems recording his experiences of going on a trip by riding horses. He also was appointed chief editor of the imperial library as well as Commander-in-Chief of the Plain White Banner 正白旗⁴⁵. Nonetheless, at thirty-seven,

⁴² The edition in *Qingdai shiwenji huibian* was carved in 1812.

⁴³ An imperial title of the Qing house. "It was the third highest of 12 titles of imperial nobility . . . awarded only to Manchus and Mongols in direct imperial descents as sons other than heirs of Commandery Prince [Qin Wang 親王]." Charles Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles of Imperial China* (Taipei: Nantian shuju, 1988), p. 371.

⁴⁴ Jin Qicong 金啟琮, "Manzhou nüciren Gu Taiqing he *Donghai yuge*" 滿洲女詞人顧太清和東海漁歌 in Jin Qicong and Jin Shi 金適, eds and annot., *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian* 顧太清集校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), p. 795.

⁴⁵ One of *baqi* 八旗 (Eight Banners). It was "the exclusive, caste-like socio-military organization that was the backbone of Manchu power and the virtual 'home' of Manchu and their original allies;" consisting of The Trimmed Yellow Banner, The Plain Yellow Banner, The Plain White Banner, The Plain Red Banner, The Trimmed White Banner, The Trimmed Red Banner, The Plain Blue Banner, and The Trimmed Blue Banner. See Mark C. Elliot, "Manchu Widows and Ethnicity in Qing China," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41.1 (Jan. 1999): 33. For more details, see Mark C. Elliot, *The Manchu Way: The Eight*

he was dismissed; the discharge may have been one of the causes of his death three years later.⁴⁶ In addition to his poetic collections, *Guanguzhai miaolian ji* 觀古齋妙蓮集, *Xiechun jingshe ci* 寫春精舍詞, and *Mingshantang wenji* 明善堂文集, he was also the co-author of *Kangxi zidian kaozheng* 康熙字典考證 with Wang Yinzhi 王引之 (1766–1834), a prominent scholar of exegeses.⁴⁷

Gu Taiqing was originally from an elite Manchu family, with surname E 鄂 and belonged to the Xilinjueluo 西林覺羅 clan, which was included in the Trimmed Blue Banner 鑲藍旗⁴⁸. Taiqing was her style name, matching Yihui's;⁴⁹ her given name was Chun 春 and her courtesy name was Meixian 梅仙.⁵⁰ Her grandfather Echang 鄂昌 was implicated in a case of literary prison and died in jail, as a result of which her family properties were confiscated, and the family was declined. Owing to this, Xilin Chun, as a descendant of a criminal, changed her surname to Gu in order to escape the notice of the Zongrenfu 宗人府 (Court of the Imperial Clan), the institution set up to “maintain the imperial genealogy, keep records on births, marriages, deaths, and all other matters

Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 39–88.

⁴⁶ Zhang Zhang 張璋 ed., *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji* 顧太清, 奕繪詩詞合集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1998), pp. 732, 737.

⁴⁷ Jin Qicong, “Manzhou nüciren Gu Taiqing he *Donghai yuge*,” p. 796.

⁴⁸ See note 44.

⁴⁹ Meng Sen 孟森 (1869–1937), “Dingxianghua” 丁香花, *Xinshi congkan sanji* 心史叢刊三集 (Taipei: Wenhai, 1982), p. 39a.

⁵⁰ About Taiqing's family background, there are three common hypotheses. The first one is that the poet was Minister Gu Badai's 顧八代 (?–1708) grand granddaughter. The second surmise is that she was a descendant of Eertai 鄂爾泰 (1677–1745). Because of the loss of the family fortune, she was adopted by the Gu family. Recent speculation holds that her grandfather Echang 鄂昌 (1700–55) was implicated in a case of *wenziyu* 文字獄 (literary prisons) and committed suicide in jail. Taiqing passed herself off as bodyguard Gu Wenxing's 顧文星 daughter in order to block inspection by the Court of the Imperial Clan. This dissertation will adopt the last hypothesis. For a detailed investigation of this issue, see Liu Sufen 劉素芬, “Wenhua yu jiazu: Gu Taiqing jiqi jiating shenghuo” 文化與家族: 顧太清及其家庭生活, *Xinshixue* 新史學 7.1 (Mar., 1996): 29–67.

pertaining to imperial kinsmen,”⁵¹ and married Yihui as his concubine.⁵² Yihui’s primary wife Miaohua 妙華 (1798–1830) passed away shortly after Taiqing entered the household and Yihui did not find another wife afterwards. Unfortunately, their marriage, albeit harmonious, lasted for only fourteen years. Right after Yihui died, Gu Taiqing and her children were forced to move out of the mansion by her mother-in-law and Yihui’s primary son Zaijun 載鈞 (1818–57).⁵³ Taiqing was able to reside in the mansion again to serve her ailing mother-in-law after the two-year exile, and her grandson was later chosen as the heir.⁵⁴ Gu Taiqing was not only a celebrated poet but also the first female novelist whose authorship scholars have been able to ascertain.⁵⁵ Her collected poetic works include *Tianyouge shiji* 天游閣詩集, *Donghai yuge* 東海漁歌, and a sequel to the *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 titled *Honglou meng ying* 紅樓夢影.⁵⁶

Literature Review

As Grace Fong indicates in the introduction to her monograph, *Herself an Author*,

⁵¹ Charles Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles of Imperial China*, p. 531.

⁵² This reason for changing her surname is Jin Qicong’s conjecture. After looking at the Qing imperial genealogy, Liu Sufen comes to the conclusion that Gu Taiqing changed her last name in order not only to avoid the dispute that derived from the fear of over-sinicization of Manchu royal family members on account of Gu’s own profound sinicization, but also to conceal the fact that Taiqing was actually Yihui’s aunt. See Jin Qicong, “Manzhou nüciren Gu Taiqing he *Donghai yuge*,” pp. 793–4; Liu Sufen, “Wenhua yu jiazhu: Gu Taiqing jiqi jiating shenghuo,” pp. 36–41.

⁵³ A common guess about the cause of the banishment was that it was owing to Gu’s disreputable family background and the struggle between the primary heir and sons by concubines. Liu Sufen provides another possibility from the perspective of the conflict between Han and Manchu cultures. See Jin Qicong, “Manzhou nüciren Gu Taiqing he *Donghai yuge*,” p. 798; Liu Sufen, “Wenhua yu jiazhu: Gu Taiqing jiqi jiating shenghuo,” pp. 50–58.

⁵⁴ Both Meng Sen and Liu Sufen make the same surmise based on the prefaces to certain poems by Taiqing. However, Jin Qicong contends that Gu Taiqing lived outside the mansion for twenty years. See Meng Sen, “Dingxianghua,” pp. 42b–47a; Jin Qicong, “Manzhou nüciren Gu Taiqing he *Donghai yuge*,” p. 798; Liu Sufen, “Wenhua yu jiazhu: Gu Taiqing jiqi jiating shenghuo,” p. 54.

⁵⁵ Ellen Wider, “*Honglou meng ying* in Biographical and Literary Perspectives,” *The Beauty and the Book: Women and Fiction in Nineteenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), pp. 181–216.

⁵⁶ Zhang Zhang, “Qianyan” 前言, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 1.

historians have been the pioneers in the field of women's studies in the Chinese context.⁵⁷ They have astutely pointed out the vicissitudes in women's status and women writers' negotiations over time with the Confucian gender system. Also, they challenged the stereotypes in the perceptions of traditional women which had been entrenched since the late Qing period and had reached a climax during the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Dorothy Ko and Susan Mann are the two big names that cannot be overlooked. The former placed her focus on the Yangzi Delta region during the seventeenth century, while the latter chose to investigate women's culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to observe the continuities and differences between the two epochs.

In her groundbreaking work, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, Ko revisited the images of traditional Chinese women as an oppressed group. Ko contends that the Confucian social system was actually more flexible than previously imagined. Educated women, including gentry women and courtesans, could obtain a certain degree of agency through their literary activities. Accordingly, the social mores manifested great accommodation to the alterations in gender relationships resulting from the socio-economic changes during the late imperial times. However, equally to our surprise, Ko also suggests that women then truly had more freedom than their predecessors, but those adjustments interestingly reinforced the ingrained gender divisions.⁵⁸

More significantly, Ko describes how men's retreat from the public to the domestic realm brought about an expansion of the cultural resources that women could access within their households. In light of this, the "inward turn" prompted "new patterns of gender

⁵⁷ Grace Fong, *Herself and Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2007), pp. 2–3.

⁵⁸ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*.

interactions.”⁵⁹ In addition to the need to tutor descendants, the burdensome and exhausting domestic duties required gentry women to attain literacy and writing ability to deal with and subsequently increase the possibility for gentry women to obtain the opportunities for receiving education.⁶⁰ Those factors facilitate higher literacy among gentry women as well as following companionate marriage.

Yet, Ko also cogently points out, unlike the surface implications of equality suggested by the term, intimacy between connubial spouses only faintly reflects the gender disparity in terms of which women’s literary talents often served merely as a temporary means to reconcile the rigid gender role differences. Moreover, marriages were indeed a means to forge alliances between elite families, and hence “conjugal bliss came only as a joyful surprise.”⁶¹ On account of this, women readers were searching for comfort from fictional works such as novels and dramas as well as the few truly existing examples of literary couples like Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠 (1081–1129) and Li Qingzhao.⁶²

Basing her work on Ko’s, Mann does not have to argue about women’s agency; rather, she turns from women’s culture in the Lower Yangzi Delta to the exploration of various dimensions of women’s life in the Qing dynasty. Synthesizing historical records and works by women writers who were mainly from the gentry class, Mann argues that the High Qing period (roughly the eighteenth century) indeed displayed different features from the previous century, which is Ko’s subject. First of all, along with the government policy of abolishing official prostitution, gentry women consciously distinguished themselves from courtesans and intentionally neglected their works or removed them from the

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 180–81.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.179.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 183–85.

anthologies they compiled of women poets. On the one hand, after the Ming-Qing transition, courtesans were greatly marginalized and not considered to be on a par with their exemplary predecessors.⁶³ On the other hand, Mann suggests that during the High Qing period, gentry women were already aware of themselves as a special group. More interestingly, as Mann observes, their consciousness was derived from the moral authority as well as the opportunity to engage in public discourse that they enjoyed as a result of their poetic creation. Unlike women writers in the seventeenth century, female authors in the High Qing period did not emphasize their admiration for the *qing* cult, but highlighted their loftiness as virtuous wives and wise mothers. Mann's insightful analysis shed light on the cultural transformations from the late Ming to the High Qing periods; women's virtues then changed from incorporation talent and beauty to an erasure of the importance of beauty and the utilization of literary talents to delineate and shape their morals.

Following the trend in critical literature of probing gender relationships, especially by placing emphasis on the role of women, Paul Ropp discusses general topics that two groups of women writers, namely courtesans and gentry women, commonly wrote about in his article, "Love, Literacy, and Laments: Themes of Women Writers in Late Imperial China." Unlike Mann, Ropp focuses particularly on the women writers' literary expressions. As he observes, gentry women who were principal wives followed conventions set by male literati for writing about yearning wives expressing their longing for their husbands. Ropp also observes that Ming and Qing poetesses would often mention family situations and duties, and even poverty, in their poetry, to urge their husbands to return sooner.⁶⁴

⁶³ Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 122–28.

⁶⁴ Paul Ropp, "Love, Literacy, and Laments: Themes of Women Writers in Late Imperial China," *Women's History Review* 2.1 (Mar. 1993): 107–41.

Writing endowed gentry women with a right to engage meaningfully in discourse as well as the cultural capital to shape their own images. Maureen Robertson, in her article, “Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China,”⁶⁵ explores how women writers negotiated with the established literary tradition of masculine voices and how they challenged and transformed what Robertson calls the “literati-feminine” voice. In Chinese poetic history, there had been prevalent “feminine” voices, but they were in fact articulated by male literati; in their fantasies, they would portray longing women in secluded boudoirs, inviting the gaze of a male readership and resulting in an objectification of women and an eroticization of the life of the inner chambers. From the Tang dynasty onward, as Robertson points out, women authors would change the direction of viewpoint in the poetry, from one gazing upon them from the outside to their own looking out from the inner chambers, and they generalized the gaze to the perspectives and feelings of all people rather than just men. In women poets’ negotiations with the existing literary tradition, according to Robertson, they successfully expressed their female voices in three ways: redefining and broadening image codes, exploring new topics based on women’s experiences, and using “a shifting voice or ambiguity in voicing in friendship poetry addressed to women.”⁶⁶ Robertson astutely notes that when writing about same-sex friendship, women writers usually blended together the feminine literati voice, a masculine literati voice about friendship, and love poetry, with ambiguous speaking subjects to modern readers. She conjectures that this could be because of the lack of a tradition of same-sex poetic communications. Also, women writers would

⁶⁵ 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 (Jun 1992): 63–110.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

appropriate the images of idealized women depicted by male literati and expect their female friends to understand that the connotation was of friendship rather than romantic love. From this perspective, exploring the distinctive feature of poetic exchanges between literary couples should be a topic of interest.

Continuing to explore the issue of how women poets carved a niche for themselves, Robertson focuses not only on women's feminine voices but also on how they presented themselves. In her article, "Changing the Subject: Gender and Self-inscription in Authors' Prefaces and 'Shi' Poetry," she discusses three topics of significance: putting women authors' works back into their contexts, the incongruity of self-representations in prefaces and in poetry itself, and how female authors transformed established masculine models into feminine ones and voiced their uniquely feminine experiences, even offering criticism. At the beginning of her article, Robertson points out the potential dangers of interpreting poetic works in circumstances isolated from their communal contexts, as presented in their original collections, and reading them today only in anthologies constructed by contemporary scholars. She cautions us that "these poems are always variously mediated forms of self-representation."⁶⁷ Robertson goes on to discuss the discrepancies often manifest in self-representations between the prefaces and the poems. Prefaces, she argues, obliged women writers to justify the legitimacy of their composition by assimilating their writing to feminine virtues, of incorporating the writing among the wife's duties to her husband's family. However, in actual poetic works, as Robertson observes, women poets are more open to articulating their autobiographical voices and freely appropriating topics previously belonging to men in the poetic tradition. Robertson describes several methods

⁶⁷ Maureen Robertson, "Changing the Subject: Gender and Self-inscription in Authors' Prefaces and 'Shi' Poetry," *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, p. 174.

that gentry women used to transform the existing poetic tradition into feminine voices.

In line with Robertson, Kang-i Sun Chang looks at poetic voice in works by male and female poets. Interestingly, as Chang has indicated, in Ming and Qing times, male literati appreciated and helped to publish works by talented women; they even showed a tendency to identify with educated women in terms of their often tragic fate and inability to use their talents to wield influence at court. For their part, women poets tended to try to emulate male “literati” writing and lifestyles. Gradually, “qing” 清 (spiritual purity), a term that had been regarded as a male quality, became a term of praise for women authors. Chang speaks of these trends as forms of “cultural androgyny.”⁶⁸ Likewise, Wai-yee Li in her book, *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature*, found that during the Ming-Qing transition, male poets would employ “indirect modes of expression” by masking their voice underneath a feminine voice to state their political thoughts, “while women poets turned to political engagement and heroic strivings in their writings.”⁶⁹ One thing I will discuss is how Chen Zhilin in a circumstance of solitude would talk with his wife as if he were an abandoned woman, marking a certain gender reversal.

Besides these pioneering studies that broke with the conventional stereotype of women in the Ming and Qing periods, the interest in writing women has also brought about two important anthologies⁷⁰ of translations of their works. *Women Writers of Traditional China*, edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, collects not only poetic works but also criticism by and on women authors. Wilt Idema and Beata Grant in their version

⁶⁸ Kang-i Sun Chang, “Ming-Qing Women Poets and Cultural Androgyny,” *Tamkang Review* 30.2 (Winter 1999): 11–26.

⁶⁹ Wai-yee Li, *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2014), p. 3.

⁷⁰ Kang-I Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, eds., *Women Writers of Traditional China*; Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, eds., *The Red Brush*.

provide more detailed biographical information to contextualize these literary works, and the anthology covers various other genres in addition to poetry, including plays and *tanci* 彈詞 (plucking rhymes).

Benefitting from the achievements of the scholars mentioned above, later studies on women authors and gender relationships have been more thematic in their focus. As is suggested by the title of her book, *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China*, Grace Fong explores the agency that gentry women were granted through literary writing. Fong “takes the view that gentry women’s varied textual production was a form of cultural practice and examines women’s autobiographical poetry collections, travel writings, and critical discourse on the subject of women’s poetry.”⁷¹ In chapter one, the author investigates Gan Lirou’s 甘立嫫 (1743–1819) autobiographic project of inscribing her life in her poetry; Gan deliberately arranged her collected works chronologically and divided each section according to phases of her life. Among these stages, “Kuiyu cao” 饋餘草 centers on her marital life and her yearning for natal family members. Gan not only wrote verses about accompanying her husband while he studied at night, but also composed several linked verses with her spouse. As Fong has indicated, nighttime provided the couple with chances and space to be alone together, away from familial responsibilities. As poetry served in various ways as an important means to forge and maintain relationships, this was a common practice among companionate couples. In chapter 2, Fong shows that writing enabled a concubine, Shen Cai 沈彩, to create and claim her own subjectivity, and transforming her position from the subordinate one of the dominant social expectation. Shen wrote many poems in an

⁷¹ Grace Fong, *Herself an Author*, Front flap.

erotic style that touches on various themes including bound feet; being “the most concealed and eroticized part of the feminine body, gentry women rarely engaged in it as a topic of the poetry.”⁷² None of the couples discussed in this thesis talked in their poetry about bound feet as boldly as Shen Cai. This thesis will show that poems on body parts situated in a conjugal context becomes a means of flirtation and expression of jealousy.

In her article, “Writing and Illness: A Feminine Condition in Women’s Poetry of the Ming and Qing,”⁷³ Grace Fong suggests that sickness and convalescence not only caused women writers to focus on different senses and conditions during illness, but also granted them leisure time for composition and even helped guide them to a condition of religious enlightenment. To complement Fong’s result, in this study, I will examine the gender relationships displayed in verses on sickness written by companionate couples.

Poems of mourning are the topic of Anne McLaren’s essay titled “Lamenting the Dead: Women’s Performance of Grief in Late Imperial China.”⁷⁴ As the title indicates, McLaren maintains that akin to the ritual of wailing for lower-class women, poems of mourning carved out a realm for gentry women to perform their grief and meanwhile construct an identity as one of filial piety and wifely virtues. Within the highly ritualistic context, their expression cannot be regarded as “authentic” but must be seen as “a medium for the ‘objectification’ of grief through a shared ‘ritualization’ of the mourning process.”⁷⁵ Mourning poetry enjoyed its publicity notwithstanding, as Wilt Idema has

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷³ Grace Fong, “Writing and Illness: A Feminine Condition in Women’s Poetry of the Ming and Qing,” in *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing*, eds. Grace Fong and Ellen Widmer (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 19–48.

⁷⁴ Anne McLaren, “Lamenting the Dead: Women’s Performance of Grief in Late Imperial China,” in Grace Fong and Ellen Widmer, eds., *The Inner Quarters and Beyond*, pp. 49–77.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

pointed out, that it focused on “private life and private emotion.”⁷⁶ Grace Fong in her article, “Private Emotion, Public Commemoration: Qian Shoupu’s Poems of Mourning,”⁷⁷ shows how poems of mourning provided gentry wives with a space to inscribe their own biographical record through shared memories with their late husbands. Among other things, in this thesis I argue that through the details presented in mourning poems, the subgenre served as a means for the expression of spousal affection.

Similarly, Xiaorong Li is interested in the question of women’s agency and their transformation of the established tradition, though she takes a different approach. Xiaorong Li explores the use of one key term—*gui* 閨 (inner chamber)—in women’s literature and traditional gender discourse in her book *Women’s Poetry of Late Imperial China*. To women in late imperial times, the inner chamber was not only an architectural feature of building delimiting private from public space, but also a constructed ideal belonging to Confucian gender ideology and a involving the subjection of female bodies to a male gaze. Through their literary compositions, women writers loosened the boundaries of the inner chambers. Gentry women, argues Li, used the inner chamber as “a symbol of women’s sexual status and gender position and became a recognizable signifier in late imperial Chinese social and cultural practices.”⁷⁸ At the same time, they transformed inner chambers from an objectified “static and passive” space subject to the imaginations of male literati, into a restricted but active sphere, constructed in poetry partly by adding details of their daily

⁷⁶ Wilt Idema, “The Biographical and the Autobiographical in Bo Shaojun’s *One Hundred Poems Lamenting My Husband*,” in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women’s Biography in Chinese History*, eds. Joan Judge and Hu Ying (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 231.

⁷⁷ Grace Fong, “Private Emotion, Public Commemoration: Qian Shoupu’s Poems of Mourning,” *CLEAR* 30 (2008): 19–30.

⁷⁸ Xiaorong Li, *Women’s Poetry of Late Imperial China: Transforming the Inner Chambers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), p. 11.

lives. At the same time, in the hands of women writers, the inner chambers underwent a process of de-eroticization while women's images in poetry shifted from the type of the abandoned wife to that of the cultured gentry woman. Moreover, Li mentions that during chaotic times such as the Ming-Qing transition and the Taiping rebellion, the political and social turmoil imposed on them also inevitably became one of gentry women's poetic themes. In this way, they broadened the range of content associated with the inner chambers.

Both Robertson and Xiaorong Li emphasize how women articulated their gender-specific voices and images and how they negotiated with and transformed the existing literary tradition. As Ko observes, the Confucian gender system was able to flexibly accommodate the flourishing women's culture.⁷⁹ Thus, the interactions between women poets and their husbands will provide a way to understand the dynamics of how men adjusted to the changes. In fact, in facing their talented wives, male literati often changed their self-descriptions accordingly; they highlighted their shared interests as perfect companions and recognized the contributions of their wives to their households. For example, Sun Yuanxiang expanded the tradition not only by regarding Xi Peilan as his intimate friend but also by applauding her beauty in a way that totally differed from previous stereotyped descriptions of wives.

Although Western and Chinese academics began to approach this field around the same time, their approaches have been quite different. Scholars writing in English have focused on the subjectivity of women writers, while Chinese and Taiwanese researchers have endeavored to evaluate the literary achievements of women authors, similar to Chinese research on male authors. The following two works can serve as examples.

⁷⁹ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, pp. 17–19.

Zhong Huiling 鍾慧玲, as a pioneer in the field in Taiwan, summarizes the major causes of the increase of in the number of women writers during the Qing dynasty in her monograph *Qingdai nüshiren yanjiu* 清代女詩人研究.⁸⁰ According to Zhong's survey, a number of trends in the Late Ming period facilitated the entry of many women writers into the literary arena; these included an ideological trend advocating the expression of one's true nature and spirit, the commercial publishing boom, the widespread publication of *shihua* 詩話 (remarks on poetry), the flourishing of poetry societies, the fashion of compiling anthologies of women's works, and the nurturing of family learning. The literary activities of these women poets included poetic exchanges, inscriptions on paintings, and inscriptions of prefaces and colophons. Zhong also selected six representative women poets and analyzed their writing styles and major topics. Xi Peilan was one of the six. Her poems were roughly categorized into four types: scenery, natal family, inner chambers, and poetic exchanges with friends. Zhong in addition analyzed Xi's writing style based on linguistic patterns. For example, according to Zhong's results, Xi Peilan liked to use colors, especially red, green, and white, in her poems to create vivid visual impressions. Using a linguistic analysis, Zhong concludes that Xi's style is full of emotions, lofty, and novel in her language.

Another pioneering work is Deng Hongmei's 鄧紅梅 *Nüxing cishi* 女性詞史,⁸¹ which, as its title indicates, present a history of *ci* composed by women writers, with representative authors and in chronological order. In the introduction, Deng identifies as the special traits of women's writing that it is lofty and natural. Also, the motifs that women

⁸⁰ Zhong Huiling, *Qingdai nüshiren yanjiu*.

⁸¹ Deng Hongmei, *Nüxing cishi* (Ji'nan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000).

authors expressed are, due to their life experiences, usually limited to domestic space, though sometimes they would convey their aspiration to escape from the restraints of their household, by speaking of a spiritual roaming in heavenly realm or becoming immortal in imagination. Like Zhong Huiling, Deng places great emphasis on probing the different writing styles manifested by various poets. Among her selection, Deng discusses Shen Yixiu, Xu Can, and Gu Taiqing. The reason for omitting Xi Peilan may be that she was not famous for her *ci* and did not leave behind many of them. Deng finds that the general poetic styles of these poetesses: Shen is elegant, Xu Can profound; and Gu Taiqing natural and unbridled.

In their two groundbreaking books, Zhong and Deng place their emphases on individual women poets, though they do not consider poetic exchanges as constituting an important subgenre, nor do they provide any detailed readings. They both talk about the significance of communities in women's culture as a part of the social background of promoting women's poetry; however, women's community does not become a crucial factor in their discussion.

Exchanged poems are an essential bridge connecting a single poet with literary communities, which is another important topic in the culture of literati. Colin Hawes, in his illuminating book, *The Social Circulation of Poetry in the Mid-Northern Song: Emotional Energy and Literati Self-Cultivation*,⁸² regards matching rhymed poetry as an important means of social criticism, and of forging relationships, remedying emotional distress, engaging in literary games, promoting ancient culture, and humanizing nature for

⁸² Colin Hawes, *The Social Circulation of Poetry in the Mid-Northern Song: Emotional Energy and Literati Self-Cultivation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006).

the Northern Song literati represented by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–72) and Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002–60). Significantly, Hawes argues that poetry was a vehicle for the energy of *qi* to moderate authors' inner emotions and cure illnesses, which were deemed a result of the imbalanced circulation of *qi*. Additionally, compared with prose, Hawes contends, poetry assumed more responsibilities for constructing and reinforcing relationships. These two traits can clearly be regularly found in poetic communications between husbands and wives in late imperial times. In some exchanged poems between husbands and wives, one of the purposes is to either comfort or be comforted; through writing, their negative emotions were to a certain degree valorized. Also, as Mann indicates, nearly all gentry women had to experience separation from their husbands for a certain time.⁸³ During the separation, as with male literati, poetry served them as the major means to build and maintain their relationships. In the same vein, the situation of forging women's communities relied heavily on poetic and epistolary communications.

Placing the focus on communications among writing women's communities, Ellen Widmer in her article, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China,"⁸⁴ by examining various materials other than poetic works, comes to a conclusion similar to Ko's, that the formation of women writers' social networks to a great extent depended on the introductions of male relatives or friends. However, Widmer also accentuates the emotional and financial support among women writers displayed in their letters. The circulation of letters enabled women authors to keep in touch with talented women outside their households. In addition, sometimes epistolary communication could

⁸³ Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 36–38.

⁸⁴ Ellen Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China," 1–43.

even engender publication projects. Widmer argues that the networks established through letters formed the basis of groups of female disciples like the one Yuan Mei led. However, Yuan was merely the nominal master; in fact, these female pupils had tighter connections with their regional or domestic societies. As David Hawkes has pointed out, Xi Peilan entered Yuan's camp after establishing her literary fame, and her development rested mainly on backing from her female friends and her husband.⁸⁵

In terms of fostering relationships, Marsha Weidner points out that paintings assumed a function similar to that of poetry. In her "Women in the History of Chinese Painting," Weidner states that paintings were "instruments of social intercourse."⁸⁶ As well as serving as presents, through poetic inscriptions, the circulation of paintings was another way of strengthening relationships among literati. And women, according to Weidner, were able to participate in these social activities. Although, as with poetic compositions, the accessibility of painting skills for women required male family members to bring them into their domestic lives, the tradition of scholarly painting enabled women to be amateur painters since, like their male counterparts, they all "learned brush techniques from the practice of calligraphy, studied antique works and painting manuals and received instructions from friends and family members."⁸⁷ Also, calligraphy, painting, and poetry usually were regarded as means of self-expression for literati. Paintings became the perfect medium for presenting the three together. As with poetry, the functions of painting were both personal and social; namely, self-expression and relationship development. It is thus interesting to see how painting and poetic inscriptions functioned in the husband and wife

⁸⁵ David Hawkes, "Hs'i P'ei-Lan," pp. 113–30.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Marsha Weidner, "Women in the History of Chinese Painting," p. 13.

relationship. Additionally, the social function of paintings allowed intimate friends of the couple to be included in their communications.

In addition to the studies mentioned above focusing on such general topics as gender relationships, women's status and agency, and the formation of communities, in the following section I will focus on research on the individual poets that this present dissertation centers around.

Li Xuyu 李栩鈺 in her master's thesis, *Wumengtang ji nüxing zuopin yanjiu* 午夢堂集女性作品研究,⁸⁸ discusses primarily works composed by women poets of the Ye family, as well as works about their female relatives by male family members. In the first part of the book, she nicely lists different editions of *Wumengtang ji* and discusses the late Ming trend of extolling women writers, especially in the Wu region, and the interactions of the Ye family in the literary arena. In the latter part of the book, Li examines those poems thematically, concentrating on sisterhood and affection among women poets, as well as poverty, mourning, religious belief, dreams, and women's experiences such as looking into a mirror and seeing plum blossom images as embodiments of oneself. In the appendix, Li presents two tables showing important events and deeds of this family, and ten different editions of *Wumengtang ji*. As a reference, this book is a good resource on editions and chronology.

As mentioned above, Li's book centers on the works of Shen Yixiu and her daughters; Ye Shoayuan's works, which were the target of Martin Huang's article, are not fully discussed. In his recently published article, "Negotiating Wifely Virtues: Guilt, Memory,

⁸⁸ Li Xuyu, *Wumengtang ji nüxing zuopin yanjiu* (Taipei: Lirem shuju, 1997).

and Grieving Husbands in Seventeenth-Century China,”⁸⁹ Martin Huang raises an interesting question: what happens when Confucian biographical norms, which extol the exemplarity of the subject of the epitaph, contend with a deep grief implicating the intimate relationship between husband and wife? Huang argues that the overlap between the two roles, that of author of an epitaph or biography and that of grieving husband, prompted husbands to redefine wifely virtues while dwelling on their own woes as well as providing detailed information on the deceased. In one of the examples, Ye Shaoyuan on the one hand describes the numerous hardships that his wife Shen Yixiu has endured, in order to underscore her virtues and to challenge the common belief that Shen had an easy life. On the other hand, Ye transgresses the common standard of filial piety in complaining to his mother that he and his wife are deprived of their private time. However, although Ye utters something that he would never have said on any other occasion, he actually does not challenge existing Confucian biographical norms but constructs in his recollection his own image as a husband beset by grief and guilt.

Based on Li Xuyu and Martin Huang’s conclusions, which center on Shen Yixiu and Ye Shaoyuan, respectively, this dissertation will place the focus its discussion of them on their interaction; such as, for instance, in Shen Yixiu’s reaction to the deprivation she experienced at the hands of her mother-in-law. Furthermore, I will explore gender difference in the poetry of mourning. In this respect, Ye Shaoyuan and Gu Taiqing form a nice basis of comparison. Ye constructs an image of himself as an incompetent husband, while Gu Taiqing adopts the method of telling her late husband things that happened recently and expressing her sorrow and yearning.

⁸⁹ Martin Huang, “Negotiating Wifely Virtues: Guilt, Memory, and Grieving Husbands in Seventeenth-Century China,” *Nan Nü* 15.1 (2013): 109–36.

In her essay “Liu Shih and Hsü Ts’an: Feminine or Feminist?” published in 1993, Kang-i Sun Chang compares two famous female figures—Liu Shi 柳是 (1618–64) and Xu Can—who respectively represent two distinct traditions in the culture of talented women, namely the traditions of courtesans and of gentry women. Liu Shi, with her paramour Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (1608–47), constructed herself as the epitome of the *qing* cult and revived *ci* poetry in the last decade of the Ming dynasty. On the contrary, Xu Can candidly expressed her resentment about her husband’s taking of a concubine, something gentry women were expected to accept. Additionally, Chang points out that Xu adeptly intertwined expression of her grief for the fallen Ming house with her personal sorrow at undergoing estrangement from her husband. However, when commenting on Xu’s works, Chen Zhilin still resorted to the traditional term “meekness and gentleness”⁹⁰ as a footnote to her works; he seemed to consciously misinterpret Xu’s intimations. Nonetheless, Chen Zhilin overtly admitted that he thought that the experience of being a Ming loyalist made her work exceptional. As Chang observes, in Xu’s *ci* that express her loyalty, she neatly blends heroic and feminine tones together and further breaks conventional gender and generic boundaries. Chang also indicates that it was more common to see husbands and wives exchange poems as “talented scholars and beautiful women” would do in novels and dramatic texts of the late Ming period.⁹¹ Chang’s article focuses primarily on the accomplishments in *ci* by the two women poets. I will discuss both her poems and the lyrics addressed to her husband.

Based on Chang’s findings, Li Xiaorong, in her article, “‘Singing in Dis/Harmony’

⁹⁰ Kang-i Sun Chang, “Liu Shih and Hsü Ts’an: Feminine or Feminist?,” in *Voices of the Song Lyric in China*, ed. Pauline Yu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 179.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 186–87.

in Times of Chaos,” discusses Xu Can and Chen Zhilin’s *changhe* poems concerned with political issues. She argues that in this particular type of poem, Chen and Xu, as a companionate couple, were an exceptional example of a couple in which the wife did not merely follow or support her husband but expressed her own ideas in dialogue with him. Xu insistently exhorted Chen to withdraw from the capricious and dangerous officialdom and retire; thus, Xu Can repeatedly described success in the bureaucracy as an illusion and therefore hoped that Chen would tame his ambitions. In responding to his wife, Chen basically rejected the models of earlier recluses. He did not regard the life of a recluse as his ideal lifestyle, and also “characterized the Peach Blossom Spring as an undesirable place.”⁹² From the beginning to the end, Chen was unable to give up his aspirations for fame and power and was willing to exert his abilities within his official positions.

A more salient topic in their poetic communication was Chen’s serving the new regime. Xu’s stance of remaining loyal to the fallen Ming house was kept to steadfastly in her work; responding to his wife, Chen needed to defend his choice in the dynastic transition. His discursive strategy involved stating that dynastic shifts rested purely on the will of Heaven. His works sometimes also show his regret, but they more likely reflected only his personal political frustrations rather than any deeper realization. His sorrow seemed to be short-term. Thanks to Chen’s frankness and tolerance, in the discussion we are able to see both his self-defense as a “turncoat” official and Xu Can’s uniqueness in expressing overtly her own contradictory thoughts. Li’s astute exploration is a good example of a particular type of poetry exchanged between husband and wife, *changhe*. As

⁹² Li Xiaorong, “‘Singing in Dis/Harmony’ in Times of Chaos: Poetic Exchange between Xu Can and Chen Zhilin during the Ming-Qing Transition,” *Jindai Zhongguo funüshi yanjiu* 近代中國婦女史研究 19 (Dec. 2011): 232.

Li indicates, Xu Can's case served to demonstrate to modern readers that gentry women might have insights on a par with those of their husbands. More significantly, Xu debates with her husband about his political career and decisions, rather than just abiding by conventional wifely norms. My own research focuses here on what Li's article leaves out—their nuptial life aside from their discussion of political issues. Apart from traditional topics such as *guiyuan* 閨怨 (laments and yearning from the inner chambers), Xu also expresses through allusions some humor regarding her relationship with her husband.

Later, other scholars would continue to explore the field of companionate couples. Both Sufeng Xu and Weijing Lu choose Wang Zhaoyuan 王照園 (1763–1851) and Hao Yixing 郝懿行 (1757–1829) as the targets of their case studies. Xu argues that Hao and Wang were the epitome of the transformation of the *qing* cult in the High Qing period. Their advocacy of *qing* was concurrent with the classical revival that extolled the value of family, rather than the romantic affairs with courtesans that were fashionable in the late Ming period. The couple found evidence in the *Shijing* to justify the desired spousal intimacy as well as women's involvement in literary creation.⁹³ Weijing Lu affirms Xu's research finding that the poetic exchanges between Hao and Wang are a demonstration of the contemporary trend of companionate marriage. At the same time, from scrutinizing their interaction, Lu indicates, Wang's brilliance sometimes led her to place pressure on Hao.⁹⁴ In my research, I discuss the question Lu raises about the relationship between literary couples and extended families.

⁹³ Sufeng Xu, "Domesticating Romantic Love during the High Qing Classical Revival: The Poetic Exchanges between Wang Zhaoyuan (1763–1851) and Hao Yixing (1757–1829)," *Nan nü* 15.2 (2013): 219–64.

⁹⁴ Weijing Lu, "Writing Love: The *Heming ji* by Wang Zhaoyuan and Hao Yixing," in *Gender and Chinese History: Transformative Encounters*, ed. Beverley Bossler (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), pp. 83–109.

Huang Qiaole in her master's thesis⁹⁵ discusses Gu Taiqing and her women's poetic community. Based on Gu's collected works and *Mingyuan shihua* 名媛詩話, compiled by Shen Shanbao 沈善寶 (1808–62), who was one of Gu's intimate friends, Huang reconstructs the biographical information of prominent members, including Xu Yanjin 許延錦 (dates unknown), Wu Zao 吳藻 (ca. 1799–ca. 1862), Wang Duan 汪端 (1793–1838), and Shen Shanbao, and the features of the community Gu belonged to. According to Huang Qiaole, Gu's community was independent and self-sufficient, yet unstable; also, poetic composition was the central factor in connecting with her social network. Interestingly, Huang Qiaole mentions that the education of their descendants also served as one of the functions of this women's community. In addition, she analyzes those of Gu Taiqing's poetic works that were addressed to her friends in the community. She finds three major themes—leisure, parting, and friendship—in this kind of poem. It is noteworthy that, as Huang Qiaole observes, the poet emphasizes hopes for reunion in her valedictory poems while voicing her laments in the face of an unpredictable future. Nonetheless, in those of Gu Taiqing's poems mourning her late friends, she clearly expresses an anticipation of a definite reunion in Heaven in the future. This provides an interesting basis of comparison with Gu's mourning poems addressed to her beloved husband, which are more engaged in talking with the deceased about her current life. Huang Qiaole also notes that Gu Taiqing applied terms from love poetry to describe her relationships with same-sex friends and, as Maureen Robertson suggests, to highlight the preciousness of these friendships.

Apart from poetry, paintings occupied an important place in Gu Taiqing's community,

⁹⁵ Qiaole Huang, "Writing from within a Women's Community: Gu Taiqing (1799–1877) and Her Poetry," (Master's thesis, McGill University, 2004).

too, and Taiqing's inscriptions on paintings are the topic of Mao Wenfang's 毛文芳 essay. Mao Wenfang, in her article titled, "Yige Qingdai guige de shijiao: Gu Taiqing (1799–1877) huaxiang tiyong xilun" 一個清代閨閣的視角：顧太清畫像題詠析論 ("A Viewpoint from the Inner Chamber: An Analysis on the Inscriptions in Paintings by Gu Taiqing"), comprehensively discusses various types of inscriptions on paintings that the poetess made and their cultural connotations. Mao lists eight types of painting that Gu inscribed, including "paintings related to couples, [courtesans], portraits of girls, male figures, portraits for inscription, gathering, and embroidery."⁹⁶ Based on the gender of the subjects and their cultural meanings, they can also be classified into two large groups—paintings of male subjects, including Gu's husband Yihui, function as a means of representation of the lifestyles and attitudes of the figures desire; poetic inscriptions were one of the components used to create the atmosphere. On the other hand, poems inscribed into the portraits of female subjects often served as a means of socialization or demonstrations of friendship. These inscriptions bespoke the woman poet's high reputation in the literary field.

Both Qiaole Huang and Mao stress the relationship and strong connection between Gu Taiqing and her female poetic friends. While Qiaole Huang does not emphasize the communication between Taiqing and Yihui, Mao discusses their inscriptions on each other's portraits. Her discussion provides a foundation for my research in terms of the poetic inscriptions they composed for other pictorial works.

Previous studies have covered topics in women's culture and status, literary accomplishments, the formation of communities, and women's subjectivity and negotiation

⁹⁶ Mao Wenfang, "Yige Qingdai guige de shijiao: Gu Taiqing (1799–1877) huaxiang tiyong xilun," *Wen yu zhe* 文與哲 8 (Jun 2006): 474.

with the tradition. Based on them, I will try to reinsert the voices of men as husbands in relationship to those of their wives, in order to better understand the husband and wife interaction and reconstruct part of the social network that these couples shared.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation particularly examines poetry exchanged between four couples, in thematically divided chapters. Chapter 1 deals with poems on separation and yearning, which are both the most described themes in all Chinese poetic works and the most commonly appearing topics in the works of Chinese women writers. Their shared experience stemmed from their husbands' leaving for the civil service exams or official posts. Compared to the other three women poets, Gu Taiqing, as a Manchu aristocrat, wrote fewer verses belonging to this type because she experienced only a short period of loneliness while her husband was alive. The other couples in this study all composed poems to reveal their sentiments during separation. Given the absence of their husbands, distance seems to have aggravated the anxieties in the minds of the women poets. The three authors all manifest their uneasiness when not receiving letters at the expected time.

As Maureen Robertson has pointed out, due to the lack of a writing tradition of their own, Ming and Qing women writers appropriated the diction as well as the tradition established by male authors, but they consciously voiced their femininity in describing their experience.⁹⁷ This chapter will briefly introduce the tradition of *guiyuan* founded by earlier male writers. Also, it will demonstrate how these talented women adopted and transformed the tradition and articulated their own voices, and in addition shaped their self-images as virtuous wives and beauties.

⁹⁷ Maureen Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine," pp. 63–110.

This chapter will also explore another anguishing but inevitable event that has long been regarded as on a par with parting while alive—the death of a spouse. Restricted by the extant works of the poets, my focus here will be primarily on the poems of mourning written by Ye Shaoyuan and Gu Taiqing. Following the tradition of the subgenre founded by Pan Yue 潘岳 (247–300), poems of mourning created a legitimate space for authors to overtly express their affection, which might not have been considered completely appropriate when the spouse was still living. The pattern often consisted of a contrast between a delightful past and the present loss, and reminiscences provoked by remnants or scenic spots they had once visited. To be more specific, Ye Shaoyuan centered more on the poverty that he had caused Shen Yixiu to suffer. His poetry not only manifests his deep regret and sorrow but also represents an idea of a wife’s virtues.⁹⁸ Gu Taiqing placed more emphasis on poetic communications, which had forged her conjugal enjoyment in the past. Generally, male literati were granted more freedom to touch upon sensual themes in describing their memories, and this was a topic that would hardly appear in works by women authors.

Chapter 2 will concentrate on the civil service exam, which was of paramount importance within the life of the gentility. As the examination constituted the major cause of the separation of genteel spouses, this section will discuss poems that the women writers addressed to their husbands struggling in the exam house to offer them encouragement and comfort. Both Xu Can and Xi Peilan penned poems to congratulate their husbands when they passed the exams. However, the results were not always cheerful. Owing to the low rate of passing, it was much more common for talented wives to express their consolation,

⁹⁸ Martin Huang, “Negotiating Wifely Virtues,” pp. 109–36.

tender regards, and emotional support in order to pacify as well as invigorate their frustrated partners. Shen Yixiu, on the contrary, revealed worries about her husband's future, which was tightly bound up with her own; she candidly articulated her hope for Ye Shaoyuan's success rather than repeated dishonor. Xu Can, too, expressed to her husband with severity her opinion opposing his political choices after entering officialdom. Interestingly, the civil exam also became material for jokes between the conjugal partners and their respective coteries.

In chapter three, intimacies in the husband and wife relationship, including jokes, sensual desire, jealousy, and the expression of spousal affection in daily life situations as well as on special occasions, are major subjects of the discussion. Those poems not only fit to some extent the modern imagination of an equal gender relationship by including voices from both sides, but also expand the tradition of presenting wives in poetry as helpmates who are capable old women. Jokes, intimacy, and expressions of affection between these cultivated couples usually were made through imagery or allusions. These methods allowed companionate couples to convey their affection under the regime of contemporary gender mores and avoid criticism. In addition, as companionate couples, they manifested strong commitment in literary activities. They would interact similarly to same-sex poetic friends, though the atmosphere they portray is more intimate than that with other poetic friends. In their lives, they strove to overcome their impoverished condition and plan their future together, including in the afterlife. Nevertheless, unlike in Western societies, companionate marriage in imperial China was not at all monogamous. To male literati love affairs and concubinage did not contradict their relationships with their primary wives. Gu Taiqing's example even shows that relationships with a primary wife and a

concubine could both be companionate ones.

Chapter 4 focuses on poetic inscriptions on paintings that literary couples composed. Apart from the life experiences they shared, their mutual interests were also displayed with regard to more concrete objects, and this particularly true with the pictorial inscriptions. Among the four pairs of couples in this study, Yihui and Gu Taiqing wrote a great number of poems classified as of this type, while the other three rarely penned poetic inscriptions on the same paintings. A more common practice of inscriptions on painting was followed by Xi Peilan, who would compose a verse on her husband Sun Yuanxiang's pictorial works. These pieces of art embodied their memories for Taiqing and Yihui and functioned as a way to express admiration between spouses for Sun and Xi. Furthermore, since paintings functioned as a medium of social interaction, their circulation would reveal the viewpoints of friends on the companionate marriage Sun and Xi enjoyed.

The final chapter will be a conclusion considering questions of image construction, depictions of marital life in poetry, and generational differences. Male authors tended to describe their gentry wives as both talented and at the same time virtuous, especially in being able to endure the poverty resulting from their husbands' financial incompetence. Additionally, confirming Dorothy Ko's research, beauty often formed a part of their images and notions of virtue. This trend became apparent in Ye Shaoyuan's hand and was continued by the circle of Yuan Mei represented by Sun Yuanxiang. Under women writers' pens, their own images contained the facets of virtuous and capable spouses, enthusiasts of poetry, and traditional yearning wives. Unlike other poetesses, Xi Peilan, who belonged to Yuan Mei's coterie, described parts of her own body in a poem presented to her husband. This suggests the need to slightly modify Susan Mann's generalization that women poets

in the High Qing period were more conservative than those in the Late Ming. Yet, the degree of happiness and sadness that were thought appropriate to poetry was similar in the two epochs. In the poetic communications between companionate couples, sorrow was a topic that could be overtly described, while delight was often conveyed through allusions. Moreover, poetry served as a means to give the husband and wife relationship limited equality on paper, while in life women still largely abided by unequal gender conventions. The public quality and circulation of poetry not only enabled friends of the couple to comment on their relationship. The publicity in addition made manifest ambiguities and contradictions between gender norms on the one hand and the expression of the husband and wife's true nature on the other; they also increased the element of performance in this type of poetic production.

Chapter 1: Separation and Yearning

Introduction

Images of women yearning for an absent husband are among the most commonly seen in traditional Chinese poetry. From the *Shijing* 詩經 until the end of the Late Imperial Period in the nineteenth century, images of yearning women have undergone several transformations. The disheveled and haggard image of the longing women, which can be found across Chinese literary history prior to the twentieth century, first appeared in “Boxi” 伯兮 in the *Shijing*.¹ In the Wei Jin dynasty, influenced by folk ballads, descriptions in poetry of gentry women, usually situated in their boudoirs, attributed to them a fear of spatial distance from the beloved and the passing of time and their beauty along with it. After the adoption of this figure by literati, the image of the yearning woman became a celebration of the static lives of chaste wives, in accordance with contemporary male ideals. Southern Dynasty poets such as Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503–51) and Xu Chi 徐摛 (474–551) focused on women’s physical beauty in lavish inner chambers filled with decorative objects and serving as a stage for the expression of the emotions of the female characters. This played a role in women’s being transformed in Chinese literature into eroticized subjects of a male gaze.² Blending the two trends mentioned above, male authors of Tang poetry and Song lyrics combined the sorrow of their female personas with depictions of scenes and seasons.³

¹ Poem 62. See James Legge, *The Shi King*, in *The Chinese Classics* (Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc., 3rd print, 2000), vol. 4, pp. 72–73.

² Grace Fong, “Engendering the Lyric: Her Image and Voice in Song,” in Pauline Yu, ed., *Voices of the Song Lyric in China*, pp. 110–14; Xiaorong Li, “The Green Window: The Boudoir in Poetic Convention,” in *Women’s Poetry of Late Imperial China*, pp. 20–32.

³ Kang Zhengguo 康正果, *Fengsao yu yanqing: Zhongguo gudian shici de nixing yanjiu* 風騷與豔情:

As mentioned in the introduction, during the Ming and Qing periods, great numbers of women writers exerted their literary and artistic talents and had chances to publish their works and circulate them in their social circle. Building on the work of male literati, the women poets appropriated the tradition while adding their own voices and a willingness to represent details of their own lives. Li Xiaorong astutely argues that Qing women writers in their poetry “take ownership and de-eroticize its imagery for their own purposes—adding voices of children and older women, and filling the inner chambers with purposeful activity such as conversation, teaching, religious ritual, music, sewing, childcare, and chess.”⁴ Additionally, as Susan Mann has observed, unlike their counterparts in the late Ming period, gentry women in the High Qing period consciously emphasized both their wifely virtues and their moral authority.⁵ Based on a reading of the poetic exchanges on separation between companionate couples, this chapter explores the tradition they were part of and the efforts that these couples made to alter the conventional image of yearning women that had been established by male literati and to construct a new literary tradition moving beyond such images. In addition, in the situation of separation and reunion, literati, especially women writers, were permitted to express their affection relatively frankly to their spouses, though they were usually supposed to be silent in poetic works. Furthermore, gender divisions become blurry on certain occasions, such as banishment and the death of a partner. This chapter will follow the order of incidents during separation from departure to return and ultimately to the permanent separation of death.

中國古典詩詞的女性研究 (Taipei: Yunlong chubanshe, 1991), pp. 188, 289.

⁴ Xiaorong Li, “Abstract” of *Women’s Poetry of Late Imperial China* on the cover.

⁵ Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 94–120.

The Very Moment of Departure

The verge of farewell is an undoubtedly legitimate occasion for companionate couples to express affection. Basically, the depictions follow the tradition of laments from the inner quarters that scenery outside is painted with the colors of sadness. Additionally, women personae, namely the authors themselves, are sloppy and disheveled, because they are completely consumed with sorrow. The occasion of a send-off in addition provides chances for gentry wives to emphasize their capabilities, morality, and devotion to literary creation. At the same time, in their own descriptions of them, male literati would help to shape the image of their talented as well as virtuous wives. Xi Peilan and Sun Yuanxiang can serve as a good example.

The very first poem on the topic of farewell in Xi's collected works expresses her emotions because her husband accompanies his father to the official post in Shenyang 瀋陽. The verse reads:

送外之瀋陽 “Sending off My Husband to Shenyang”

策馬竟投東，深閨未許從

Urging the horse, yet surprisingly the purpose is to go toward the east;⁶
Those living in a deep inner chamber are not permitted to follow.

君行無萬里，妾意有千重

You have not yet gone ten thousand *li*;

When your humble wife's thoughts have thousands of layers.

語到臨歧絮，情緣惜別濃

Arriving at the forked road,⁷ our words became prattle;

Reluctant to part, we felt the destiny of *qing* more strongly.

曉窗還對鏡，膏沐為誰容

At the dawn window, still facing the mirror;
for whom I am oiling and washing my hair.⁸

⁶ *Toudong* refers to *toudong moxi* 投東摸西, which means running around busily making a living.

⁷ The term, *linqi*, which literally means arriving at a fork in a road, is also used to indicate the moment of bidding farewell.

⁸ Xi Peilan, *Changzhen 'ge ji* 長真閣集, in *Qingdai shiwenji huibian* 清代詩文集彙編 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 464, p. 616.

In this farewell poem, the poet emphasizes distances and shifts in space. At the beginning, she presents a contrast between rushing towards a destination and being confined to the inner chamber. Given the restriction, she states her discontent at not being permitted to accompany her beloved. In the following couplet, Xi continues to contrast the increasing distance of Sun's journey and her own immobility. The further he travels, the deeper becomes her inner yearning; a clear chiasmus rests in her sentiment and the increasing distance between them. Through the use of this structure, the author implies that this is a mutual feeling. The poetess then moves the focus to the very spot of farewell. In speaking of "arriving at the forked road," she vividly presents the realization that they need to go in opposite directions—the capital and home, respectively. The word "arriving" in addition creates a sense of time pressure and hence leads to garrulousness. Omission of the subject leaves an ambiguity about who is being loquacious; considering the context, it could be the husband, the wife, or both. The verbose farewell expresses their worries for each other that stem from solicitude as well as yearning and therefore proves their bond based on *qing*. The poet clearly indicates that separation provides an occasion for the lovers to feel their desire more deeply and strengthen their love. In the last couplet, the locale shifts back to the inner chamber. The poetess adopts the well-known figure of the "lament of the inner chamber" from the *Shijing*, in which, owing to her husband's absence, the wife is languid and uninterested in dressing up.⁹ In this, Xi Peilan is in line with a long tradition of *guiyuan* 閨怨 (laments of the inner chamber). She uses the word *hai* 還 (still) to highlight the condition of enduring a sense of

⁹ See note 1.

blankness while facing a mirror from nightfall to daybreak. This may represent not only a return to her own domicile after a farewell, but also the condition of everyday waiting.

Compared to his wife, Sun Yuanxiang chooses, when Xi returns to her natal family owing perhaps to the death of her father, to highlight her filial piety, and highly praises Xi's virtues as daughter-in-law. He describes her as secretly shedding tears because she misses her parents. In watching her carriage slowly leaving home, he is anxious about the uncertain date of her return. From his descriptions of his tears and the likelihood of her prolonging her stay, he makes clear her affection for her parents. His observations reveal the stress of marriage for young women, particularly in the context of leaving their family and adjusting to life in the husband's household. Xi mentions in a poem penned during her newlywed period that she weeps in her sleep while dreaming about having to bid farewell to her family on the eve of her marriage.¹⁰ Sun presents an image of himself as a considerate spouse who observes his wife carefully and is concerned about her melancholy. He spends the second half of the poem discussing her contributions to the life of their household. He says, "On a day with nice weather, I restrain myself and allow you to leave off washing the hemp cloth; who knows how to season soup with fragrant thoroughwort on my behalf? My parents are already used to being served by both of us; they do not like Liang Hong sending his respects alone" 風日忍教休澣葛，羹湯誰解替調蘭？高堂已是承歡慣，不喜梁鴻獨問安。¹¹ From these depictions, readers can easily think of her as a diligent wife performing women's work. Sun also makes use of his awkwardness to highlight the idea of feminine virtue; this culminates with her complete

¹⁰ Xi Peilan, "Siqin" 思親, *Changzhen'ge ji*, p. 616.

¹¹ Sun Yuanxiang, "Zengfu" 贈婦, in *Tianzhen'ge ji* 天真閣集, in *Qingdai shiwenji huibian* 清代詩文集彙編 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 464, p. 5.

acceptance by her parents-in-law at the end. Her fitting perfectly into the family also strengthens the intensity of her yearning for her natal family at the beginning. The poet also suggests the harmoniousness of their marriage through allusions to the famous precedent of Liang Hong, as well to her washing of the clothes. The latter is from “Getan” 葛覃, in *Shijing*.¹² This ode presents a gentry wife asking her teacher of the inner chamber to allow her to spend less time washing clothes so that she can visit her natal family. In using this allusion, Sun describes the situation of returning to the natal family; he also reveals the laborious works that a gentry wife needs to take on. Also, the first stanza of “Getan” describes the heroine’s marriage as like orioles flying side-by-side and singing harmoniously. Implicitly, Sun Yuanxiang is expressing his affection and hope for shortening her absence.

Similar to Xi’s verse above, Shen Yixiu also largely abides by the tradition of *guiyuan* poetry. In one of her poems bidding farewell to Ye Shaoyuan,¹³ Shen emphasizes her gloom and emaciation, due to separation, reflected in the mirror. His mobility is also continuously underscored in the poem’s powerful ending: “Your humble wife faces the bright mirror and naturally feels that her appearance is worthy of shame; You go towards Chang’an to look for places that you have visited in the past. You step onto all of the roads that you have visited in the past in Chang’an; In its agony, the soul being severed should ask the person in the tower of washing her face and putting on makeup” 妾臨明鏡自堪羞，君向長安覓舊遊。踏遍長安舊遊路，斷魂應問洗妝樓。 The sharp contrast between her sorrowful waiting, which causes her waning and

¹² Poem 2. See James Legge, *The Shi King*, pp. 2–3.

¹³ Shen Yixiu, “Song Zhongshao beishang *dingmao chun*” 送仲韶北上 丁卯春, in *Lichui ji*, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 43.

sloppiness as reflected in the mirror, and Ye's joyful journey in the capital, is apparent. Meanwhile, she reminds her husband not to forget that she is still waiting in the inner chamber.

One year later, Shen composed another piece with the same title.¹⁴ She juxtaposes various images of harmonious marriage, separation, and farewell situated in springtime. The verdant landscape is reflected into the residence, where “thoughts of separation invade into letter paper with a phoenix watermark, and the quilt with the mandarin duck pattern blames the incense burner for becoming exhausted too fast” 鸞緜侵別思，鴛錦怨香篝。¹⁵ In using the concepts of “invade” and “resent,” the author presents her unwillingness to face the interrupted intimacy and forced separation. When the focus moves to the spot of departure, she mentions the typical symbol of farewell, namely plucking willow branches to express the wish for her husband to stay. At the same time, the spring scenery not only arouses her sense of woe about the passing of time, but also reminds her of the experience of bidding farewell the previous spring. In addition, she feels a taste of bitterness, thinking of the repeated experience of bidding farewell year after year. The poetess sighs that she is as unmovable as the bright moon in the sky. Considering that, it is hard for her to chase after the gliding moonlight, which can follow her husband wherever he goes. To conclude the verse, the poetess states, “For the moment, I sing a song to bid farewell to you; for the time being, let me make a roam beyond human cares” 聊歌送君曲，且作無情遊。¹⁶ By alluding to the renowned poem by Li Bo 李白 (701–62), Shen undertakes a complete twist from the previous

¹⁴ Shen Yixiu, “Song Zhongshao beishang” 送仲詔北上, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 34

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

conventional description. Rather than passively waiting, she tries to imitate her male precedent, Li Bo, described as spiritually roaming with the moon in the heaven and forgetting the sentiments rooted in human relationships. Also, it is striking that writing poetry for her husband is the means to transcend the sorrow. At the same time, this could also be a way of telling her husband not to worry about their family.

The occasion of departure is the best opportunity for gentry women to manifest wifely virtues, which are embodied in their concern, exhortation, and encouragement with regard to their beloved husbands. In the situation of farewell, Xu Can expresses a deep worry about the safety of her husband in a time of political transition. The poem reads:

送素庵之白下 “Sending off Su’an to Go to Baixia”

蕭晨命輕舸，相送寒江潯

In the lonely and cheerless autumn morning, you order a swift small boat;
I see you off to the bank of a wintry river.

斯行雖不遐，世故紛難任

Although this trip will not take a long time, turmoil in the world is so
innumerable and disorderly that is hard to bear.

天地異今昔，陵谷移崇深

The heaven and earth are different in the present and past;
Mountains and valleys lose their steepness.

旌旆彌天翻，長戟森如林

Banners flutter and seems to cover all over the sky;
Multitudinous long halberds line up like forests.

安危豈有常，恃此方寸心

How could safety or danger have constancy?
You need to rely upon this heart, which only occupies a tiny space in your
chest.

珍重御裘褐，無使霜霰侵

Take care and put on warm clothes;
Do not let frost and sleet invade your body.¹⁷

¹⁷ Xu Can, “Song Su’an zhi Baixia, in *Zhuozhengyuan shiji*, in *Qingdai guige shiji cuibian* 清代閨閣詩集萃編, ed. Li Lei 李雷 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), vol. 1, p. 547.

Evidently, unlike Xi and Shen, the author does not mention her own melancholy deriving from separation. Rather, under the circumstance of dynastic transition, represented through dramatic natural changes, and of severe warfare, embodied in the horrifying scenes of a forest of halberds and sky-veiling banners, safety is her utmost concern. Additionally, due to her understanding of Chen Zhilin's eagerness in pursuing political power, Xu urges her husband to follow his moral intuitions to keep him from perils. By expressing her wholehearted worry and advice, the poetess presents herself as a caring and virtuous wife. The image is consolidated in the very last couplet, a conventional closing she uses to show her loving care for his health. At the same time, the frost and sleet not only mean literal coldness but also connote vicious forces; still, she reminds her husband to keep his integrity in the chaotic time.

Akin to Shen and Xu, Xi Peilan wrote a poem in which she evinces her steadfast encouragement of her husband when sending him off to the capital to sit for the civil service exam. The verse reads:

送外之京兆 “Seeing My Husband Going to the Capital”
 思家休戚戚，文戰仗精神
 When you miss home, do not be forlorn;
 The literary battle relies on vigor.
 蠶葉聲須快，機花樣要新
 The sound of nibbling mulberry leaves should be fast;
 The patterns of flowers on the loom must be novel.
 願君攀桂子，免受齋辛
 I hope you will pluck blossoms of cassia,¹⁸
 to relieve your humble wife from enduring the adversity of eating only salted
 vegetables.¹⁹
 莫笑閨中質，猶能代奉親
 Do not laugh at the weak body in the inner chamber;

¹⁸ The phrase *zhèguì* 折桂 (plucking the branches of a sweet olive tree) connotes passing the civil service exam.

¹⁹ The term *jiyan* 齋鹽 literally means meals that include only salted vegetables with rice, which is a metaphor for an extremely impoverished life.

Which can still serve our parents on your behalf.²⁰

At the beginning, Xi urges Sun Yuanxiang to completely concentrate on the exam. Her tone becomes indistinguishable from that of a worrying mother. Interestingly, she refers to traditional woman's work in images of raising silkworms and weaving cloth as metaphors to advise him—to compose a good “eight-legged” essay not only quickly but also using novel ideas and language so as to succeed in the exam. Thus, this poem shows Xi's understanding of the civil service exam. In the next couplet, the poetess hopes that her husband will “pluck blossoms of cassia,” indicating the scoring of a triumph in the test, by which he would thereby improve their financial condition. In that way, the burden on her shoulders could be lightened. She thus presents herself as a dutiful wife performing her household tasks, including serving her husband's parents, while suffering from great emotional stress on account of the civil service exam. By serving the parents, as was the duty of a daughter-in-law, she not only manifests her virtues but also could eliminate the factors distracting Sun.

Replying to his wife, Sun Yuanxiang in his poem titled, “Will Go to the Capital; I Compose a Verse Following the Rhymes My Wife Used to Use” 將之京師次內韻, indicates that his concern is entirely for his elderly parents. He links his noticing their hair growing white with his sadness about his departure. He then earnestly begs Peilan to “act simultaneously as a son; do not avoid the hardship [of serving my parents] on my behalf” 願卿兼作子，替我莫辭辛。²¹ Not only voicing his concern for his parents but also replying to the complaint from his wife, Sun begs her to endure and solve more

²⁰ Xi Peilan, “Song wai zhi jingzhao,” *Changzhen 'ge ji*, p. 619.

²¹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Jiang zhi jingshi ci nei yun,” *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p. 20.

difficulties considering their deep affection. At the same time, the statement reveals his utter confidence in her capabilities. After obtaining her promise, he leaves with both tears and a smile. Meanwhile, by means of presenting his wholehearted care for his parents, also shapes his image as a pious son.

Sun Yuanxiang having failed the exam mentioned above, several years later, Xi composed another verse on the same topic. In this poem, besides the image of a virtuous wife, she emphasizes the identity of a talented woman. The poem reads:

送外入都 “Sending off My Husband to the Capital”
 打疊輕裝一月遲，今朝真是送行時
 Packing light baggage. It is one month late;
 Today is really the time of bidding farewell.
 風花有句憑誰賞，寒暖無人要自知
 When I come upon poetic lines on flowers in the wind,²² whom can I ask to
 appreciate them?
 No one takes care of you, so you need to be aware of coldness and warmth for
 yourself.
 情重料應非久別，名成翻恐誤歸期
 Our love is deep, I suppose this should not be a long separation;
 If you achieve fame, I fear that your date of return will be delayed.
 養親課子君休念，若寄家書只寄詩
 In looking after parents and instructing children, you do not need to worry;
 If you send letters home, just send poems.²³

With a great show of reluctance and procrastination, Xi Peilan hints at the couple's closeness and suggests that she is unwilling to face the separation. She assumes that Sun too will seek to return soon. Ironically, his success is likely to be an impediment to this and to prolong the separation. Echoing a previous *guiyuan* poetic line, “Feeling regret to let my husband pursue the career of being conferred peerage” 悔教夫婿覓封侯,²⁴ she

²² *Fenghua* literally means flowers in the winds and metaphorically literary works with beautiful scenery presented in flowery language.

²³ Xi Peilan, “Song wai rudu,” *Changzhen 'ge ji*, p. 633.

²⁴ Wang Changling 王昌齡 (698–756), “Resentment from the Inner Chamber” 閨怨, *Quan Tangshi* 全唐

feels some ambivalence towards her husband's pursuit of a political career. There is clearly a tension being represented for both partners between spousal intimacy and the husband's career. However, Xi Peilan herself divides her image of her own competence between the roles of wife and poet. The loneliness felt in the face of the temporary loss of the first appreciative reader at the moment of coming up with poetic lines is mutual. Therefore, her longing for Sun to return becomes not only the content but also the form of their poetry, so that in the exchange of poetic letters, which she requests of him and they both perform, physical separation is given what is partly a spiritual or literary cure. Furthermore, it testifies to her fondness for poetry and discloses poetic composition as their family tradition.

Xi Peilan's image as a talented gentry wife is also presented in poems by her husband. Before leaving for the capital, Sun wrote the following poem to bid her farewell:

入都留別 “Will Go to the Capital; I Composed this Poem to Bid Farewell”
 從來路近說長安，往復雙魚達不難
 Talking about Chang'an, we have always commented that the road to it is near;
 not difficult for double fish,²⁵ sent back and forth to arrive.
 書莫經年忘卻曬，詩須按月寄來看
 Do not forget to sun books over a year;
 You should send me poems every month.
 深知蓬戶持非易，猶喜荆釵典未完
 I well understand that managing a thatched house is not easy;
 still happy that your thorn hairpins have not yet all been pawned.
 祇恐深閨太岑寂，故教新婦為承歡 一月前為大兒成婚
 Only afraid that the deep boudoir is too lonely.
 I therefore tell our newlywed daughter-in-law to shoulder the task of pleasing her
 parents. *For just one month ago we held our eldest son's wedding.*²⁶

詩, ed. Peng Dingqiu 彭定求 (1645–1719) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2nd printed, 1979), p. 1446.

²⁵ *Shuangyu* refers to letters, which were usually sandwiched between two fish-shaped wooden boards, which is the word's literal meaning.

²⁶ Sun Yuanxiang, “Rudu liubie,” *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p. 103.

Unlike in the typical poetry of separation, Sun emphasizes the short distance between his hometown and the capital and the easy of delivery of letters. Considering that, it clearly suggests the constancy of their poetic communication during their separation. Resonating with Xi Peilan's request that he sends poems home, Sun further states that they should exchange regular communications demonstrating their close relationship as built on frequent poetic dialogues. This reveals that one aspect of their interaction was that they were like poetic friends, maintaining a certain equality in their literary works, though in their life together, she was still the one doing most of the household chores for him and their family. At the same time, this also reveals the hierarchy between husband and wife, as a gentry wife was expected to assume responsibility for a wide range of domestic chores. In addition to typical duties, "sunning" books, a task consisting of physical labor and a sort of literary knowledge, which involved determining which books ought to be taken out, is one of the things a gentry wife needed to take care of. The theme of household management continues in the following couplet. The poet as usual extols his wife's capability of enduring poverty and selling her jewelry to support the impoverished household. On the one hand, Sun applauds her great contribution, remarkable skill in managing the family economy, and virtue. On the other hand, he jokingly demonstrates his feeling comfortable with their close relationship despite a poor financial condition. Also, to illustrate his consideration of her needs, he lends an understanding tone to his narration. His consideration of Peilan permeates the ending couplet; having lost his companion, her loneliness is the focus of his concern. More importantly, his reaction not only explain one likely reason for wanting to form a domestic poetry society consisting of

mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law within the gentry class, but also reveals the dilemma of the daughter-in-law. Being filially pious takes absolutely priority to spousal intimacy. Yet, interestingly, the situation of the Sun family is such that Sun's absence would deprive his literate daughter-in-law²⁷ of her private time with her husband. This clearly manifests that marital intimacy was itself deeply situated in an extended family.

The poetry of farewell is inevitably full of strong sentiments, regardless of the gender of the authors. The strong sorrow, which is the major theme of poems about women written by precedent male poets, usually results in adopting traditional descriptions and allusions of sadness. However, apart from the tradition, both women poets and husbands emphasize their wifely virtues and capabilities. In addition to the image of virtuous wife, the strong need to express for poetic communications in the future suggests their close spousal relationships. Meanwhile, gentry wives implicitly emphasize their identity as authors and their fondness of literature. Clearly, when literate women had the opportunity to voice their thinking and concerns in poetry, they would demonstrate qualities that went beyond the commonplaces in the tradition of *guiyuan* poetry, which tended to construct female personae as merely disheveled and heartbroken. In addition to the wives' own efforts, the points of view of their husbands also help to build and reinforce the image of the virtuous wife as well as the cultured poetess.

Separation

In situations involving separation, the works of both male and female poets are

²⁷ Sun and Xi's first daughter-in-law was Tao Lingqing 陶菱卿. Xi's collected work includes a poem mourning for Tao indicating that Tao was her eldest daughter-in-law. Tao belonged to Xi's social circle. In Sun Yuanxiang's inscription in the painting titled "Ruigong huashi tu" 蕊宮花史圖 about the gathering organized by Qu Bingyun 屈秉筠 lists the twelve participants including Tao, Qu, and Xi. See Xi Peilan, "Guan zhangxi Tao Lingqing yizhao shi yi kuzhi" 觀長媳陶菱卿遺照詩以哭之, in *Changzhen'ge ji*, p. 657; Sun Yuanxiang, "Ruigong huashi tu bingxu" 蕊宮花史圖并序, in *Tianzhen'ge waiji*, p. 605.

pervaded with sorrow resulting from distance. These works differ from poems about the moment of departure, as verses composed during separation tend not to involve strong emotions such as tear-shedding or heartbreak but are more restrained, melancholy, or even depressive. Additionally, expressions of yearning are another main theme of these pieces, and sadness serves as evidence of the affection between husband and wife. Also, poetic composition, serving as both a means of communication and a leisure activity, plays a significant role in the letter senders' depictions of life. As in poems about separation in other kind of relationships, here reminiscence on past happiness contrasts sharply with the loneliness of the present. And as in poems on the sending-off of spouses, male literati express their gratitude for the contributions of their wives to the family. By adding actual details into a womanly motif, namely, tailoring and sending clothes to the beloved, women authors express love for their husbands and their own virtues. While being worthy spouses, they also manifest characteristics that differ from the conventional image of a wife, such as that of the resentful woman or the provider of advice.

During a period of separation, one of the most delightful things was receiving a message from home. In the poem titled “Receiving Letter from My Wife” 得內人書,²⁸ Sun Yuanxiang describes his reaction to the letter from home, and via his observation, his affection for his wife at the same time surfaces:

鵲聲啼上夕陽枝，錦字書來隔月遲
 Sounds of magpie voice on the branches in sunset;
 The letter with its words woven on brocade²⁹ has arrived for a month late.

²⁸ Sun Yuanxiang, “De neiren shu,” in *Tianzhenge ji*, p. 21.

²⁹ “Jinshu” refers to the allusion of a talented wife, Su Hui 蘇蕙, who was married to the magistrate of Qinzhou 秦州, Dou Tao 竇滔. When Dou disobeyed the order from the sovereign, Fu Jian 苻堅, he was exiled to Dunhuang 敦煌, where he met a courtesan, Zhao Yantai 趙陽台, and married her as his concubine. Su was upset and jealous about Zhao, and they slandered each other in front of Dou Tao. This resulted in Dou’s dissatisfaction with Su. When Dou got a new appointment to Xiangyang 襄陽, he invited Su to go with him and Zhao. Su refused the request out of resentment, and they ceased communication. Su

封處尚疑雙別淚，開時惟有一緘詩

I still suspect that there are a pair of tear stains on the sealed place;
When I open the letter, there is only a piece of a poem inside.

黃花比瘦燈初覺，翠黛含顰鏡獨知

Your appearance is thinner than yellow flowers; the lamp is the first one who
becomes aware;

Eyebrows with black green color contain a slight frown that only the mirror
knows.

應是望予書更切，急彈紅燭寫烏絲

You must expect my letter more eagerly than I do;

I quickly pinch the wick of the red candle and write my poem on letter paper
with ink column.

In the beginning couplet, the author hints at the delayed delivery of the letter as seen at dusk. Simultaneously, he uses the twittering of magpies to underline the exhilaration about getting messages from his spouse. In addition, the clear memory of the lateness of the letter demonstrates his eager desire to hear from her. The tear stains that he notices when opening the envelope illustrate the mutual yearning from the other side. Also, while reading her verse, Sun imagines Peilan's haggardness, sorrow, and loneliness owing to their separation. Attesting to the thought of the poet, Xi's verse sending her husband away from home states that "my body becomes emaciated due to engaging in poetry composition" 人從詩裡瘦.³⁰ By means of the vivid imagination, not only is his

then felt remorse and embroidered two hundred poems with five-color threads onto a small handkerchief. Su astutely arranged those poems and made them so that they would be meaningful no matter which direction they were read from. After receiving the gift, Dou was moved by her deep affection; he then divorced Zhao and welcomed Su to Xiangyang with a carriage of rich presents. Upon this, they were affectionate. Su's work received the name of "huiwen" 回文, and was widely circulated and imitated. Later, huiwen became a subgenre, which appealed especially to women writers. For example, Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty wrote a preface to this work. By using this allusion, Sun Yuanxiang emphasizes Su's literary talents as well as her deep love for her husband. See Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (579–648), "Doutao qi Sushi" 竇滔妻蘇氏, in *idem.*, *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), p. 2523; Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705), "Xuanjitu xu" 璇璣圖序, in Kang Wanmin 康萬民, *Xuanjitu shi dufa* 璇璣圖詩讀法, in *Wenyuange siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, eds. Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805) et al. (Taipei: Taiwan shanhuw, 1983), vol. 1063, pp. 655–56.

³⁰ Xi Peilan, "Jiwai" 寄外, in *Changzhenge ji*, p. 662.

affection evident, but also the image of his wife in the fantasy abides by the conventional *gongti* tradition under the male gaze. Furthermore, his consideration of her waiting and his immediate answer, which betokens his strong eagerness to share his feelings, make him an affectionate companionate husband. Moreover, in the narration, Sun repeatedly emphasizes the identity of poetess and the gifts of his wife by allusions, namely the palindrome Su Hui 蘇蕙 wove on brocade to her husband and Li Qingzhao's 李清照 (1084–ca. 1155) celebrated poetic line, “She’s more wasted than the yellow flowers”³¹ 人比黃花瘦, in a *guiyuan ci*. The identity is additionally reiterated in the description that a poem is the only thing in the envelope. More importantly, it completely echoes Xi Peilan’s request that Sun should only send poetry as letters from home, exactly what she herself does in practice. Another example in a verse Sun composes when sending a letter from the capital years later, he presumes Xi “must have pondered over”³² the poems she was sending to her husband” 應有推敲寄外詩.³³ When paralleled with the previous line saying that she “must labor to cook meals for her parents-in-law in person” 定勞辛苦調親膳, her poetic creation carries a similar weight to women’s works in the traditional understanding.

³¹ Li Qingzhao, “To the Tune: Drunk in the Blossom’s Shadows” 醉花陰, in *Quan Songci* 全宋詞, ed. Tang Guizhang 唐圭璋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 8th printed, 2009), vol.2, p. 929. The translation is from Ronald Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), p. 233.

³² “Tuiqiao” refers to an allusion of a poet, Jia Dao 賈島. Jia once wrote the line, “Birds lodged on the trees in the pond; a monk knocked a door [under] the moon” 鳥宿池中樹, 僧敲月下門. He was contemplating between either knocking or pushing the door; he was so occupied that he repeatedly made the two gestures. In the end, Jia’s superior, Han Yu 韓愈, who was also a famous poet, decided that “knock” is better than “push.” Later, “tuiqiao” became a term indicating deliberately appropriate words or careful consideration. See He Guangyuan 何光遠, *Jianjie lu* 鑑戒錄, ed. Liu Shi 劉石, in *Wudai shishu huibian* 五代史書匯編, comps and eds. Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮 and Xu Hairong 徐海榮 (Hangzhou: Hangzhou chubanshe, 2004), vol. 10, p. 5931.

³³ Sun Yuanxiang, “Ji’nei” 寄內, *Tianzhenge ji*, p 108.

Echoing her husband, Xi depicts the process of composing a poem addressing her beloved. In a series of poems³⁴ sent to her husband that she composes on the Double Seventh Festival, Xi Peilan in the first three quatrains describes her emaciation and melancholy resulting from the holiday that originated from a romantic love story and the seasonal change. This is in the typical style of poetry on yearning. In the last verse, she turns the focus from longing to writing a letter:

瑤鴨添香翠被舒，挑燈細作一緘書

Adding incense into the precious incense burner in the shape of a duck and the unfolding quilt with the emerald green pattern;
Under the lamp, I meticulously write a piece of letter.

朦朧隱語藏深意，莫認粗心誤豕魚

The ambiguous puns contain my profound meanings;
Do not regard them as my careless miswritings those characters owing to their similar shapes.³⁵

Differently from the previous three verses in this series, the writer presents herself as a clever, literate woman. Besides being able to draft a letter, she is even skillful at word games. Xi Peilan also humorously makes a joke reminding her husband, Sun Yuanxiang, not to mistake her seeming message. The closeness between the couple becomes clear in light of this. It is conceivable that the profound meanings that the poetess expresses

³⁴ Xi Peilan, “Qixi jiwai shu” 七夕寄外書, in *Changzhen’ge ji*, p. 619.

³⁵ “Shiyu” is a shortened form of “豕亥魚魯.” It originates from two stories that are both about miswritten characters; the first half is from the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 and the other part is from the *Baopu zi* 抱朴子. *Lüshi chunqiu* records that there was someone reading the *Shiji* 史記 and saying that there were three pigs (三豕) in the army of the state of Jin 晉 crossing the Yellow River. Zixia 子夏 stated that “three pigs” was inaccurate; the term should be “jihai” 己亥. *Baopu zi* documents a proverb saying that when a book has been transcribed several times, the character for fish (魚) would become that for stupidity (魯) and the character for vacant (虛) would become that for tiger (虎), due to their similar shapes. This phrase afterwards was used to indicate miswritten characters in books owing to repeated transcription. See Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (292 B.C.E.–235 B.C.E) comp., *Lüshi Chunqiu xin jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋新校釋, annot. Chen Qiyu 陳奇猷 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), p. 1527; See Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343), *Baopu zi neipian jiaoshi: zengding ben* 抱朴子內篇校釋: 增訂本, annot. Wang Ming 王明, in *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* 新編諸子集成 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), p. 335.

connote her love and longings. Based on this, Xi consciously follows the poetic convention that gentry women should not overtly speak of their yearnings to a male addressee;³⁶ nor for that matter, generally, to their husbands. As mentioned above, in another poem sent to her husband, Xi Peilan directly connects her thinness with poetic composition. Presumably, many of those poems are about her yearning, but instead of merely talking about longing, it is clear that she places more emphasis on the identity of the poet rather than a yearning woman.

In the verse titled, “Inscribing A Poem Appended after a Letter from Home” 題家書後, Sun candidly states that epistolary communications plays a significant role for him and his wife in expressing their affection. In addition, he depicts in detail his concerns about her, which reveal his warm care and understanding of his wife:

紅箋易盡情無盡，箋盡還多未盡辭
 Red letter paper is easily written to the end, but affection is endless;
 The letter paper is used up, but still have plenty of words that are not yet finished.
 花下涼暄須自覺，燈前閒暇莫相思
 Sitting under flowers, you should be aware of coldness and warmth for yourself;
 Sitting in front of the lamp, do not fall into lovesickness.
 未妨對奕呼新婦，休為翻羹惱侍兒
 When feeling like competing in Chinese chess with someone, there is no harm in commanding our newlywed daughter-in-law;
 Do not be angry at serving maids because of their knocking over the thick soup.³⁷
 但看海棠開到近，是臨行約是歸期
 Just when you see the blooming of crab apples approaching nearby;

³⁶ Kang-i Sun Chang, “Liu Shih and Hsu Ts’an,” pp. 179–80.

³⁷ The allusion is from the biography of Liu Kuan 劉寬 in the Hou Hanshu. Liu had a great temper. His wife liked to make him mad, and so she ordered a maid to serve him a thick soup and knock it onto Liu’s official robe just when he was ready to go to a meeting at the court. Liu did not change his facial expression at all and considered that the soup had scalded her hands. *Nanshi* 南史 also records a similar anecdote about Xiao Mai 蕭勣 not being enraged when hot soup was spilled on him. See Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu*, p. 888; Li Yanshou 李延壽 (?), *Nanshi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), p. 1263.

This was our promise as I left; this is the date of my return.³⁸

The poet here straightforwardly chooses to repeatedly use “jin” 盡 (end, deplete) to create a sense of continuity and endlessness in relation to his strong affection. The body of this poem centers on exhortations to his wife. Akin to what Xi Peilan said to him, he considers her health both physically and mentally. This implicitly attests to a tight emotional bond is not unilateral but mutual. Furthermore, in a way that resonates with another poem that he penned before leaving for the capital, the boredom Peilan feels in her leisure time remains one of his concerns, and he again encourages her to summon their daughter-in-law to spend time together. Interestingly, his exhortation to Xi enacts a reversal of the usual pattern wherein gentry women serve as advice providers and comforters. At the same time, this line also reveals his observation and deep understanding of her. This kind of description of a gentry wife and spousal interaction is presented almost entirely in terms of the poetic conversation between husband and wife. Also, in health, mood, leisure time, and responsibility, Sun Yuanxiang fully demonstrates his consideration and their deep affection for her. In the closing couplet, the firm tone of his promise shows his desire for reunion, as he simultaneously comforts Peilan in her sorrow and yearning through an expression of confidence in the future. A similar promise Sun makes in another poem for his wife, saying, “The returning sail will not miss the appointment we made when arriving at the forked road, as long as you enjoin the lotus to blossom slightly late” 歸帆不爽臨歧約，但屬荷花略放遲。³⁹ Although he indirectly confesses that he will be late for the appointment, Sun playfully expresses his hope for

³⁸ Sun Yuanxiang, “Ti jiashu hou,” *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, pp. 286–87.

³⁹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Jinei” 寄內, *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p 108.

appreciating the lotus together with her.

When authors compose poems for their spouses, their memory of being with them can motivate them to devote a certain portion of their works to revealing their affection and the longing that grows in separation. Sun Yuanxiang, in a poem written to celebrate the birthday of hundreds of kinds of flowers, indicates that in his toilsome journey, he is enduring not only a difficult situation but also the bitterness of yearning for his wife at home. In a scene of cutting color papers, a custom of this festival, he recalls his sweet memory of them the preceding year. “Under the green window, red sleeves⁴⁰ cut colorful letter papers; the weather contained drizzle and spring was like a dream The rope tying the bell was swaying by itself, and hearts are swinging; the smoke from the incense burner does not break off, and the affection is deep and lingering” 綠窗紅袖擘蠻箋，天含細雨春如夢. . . . 鈴索自搖心蕩漾。爐煙不斷意纏綿。⁴¹ In his reminiscence, Peilan is a beautiful lady in gaily-colored surroundings. Drizzles create a sense of chill, but also an intimate atmosphere in the inner space. The spring refers not only to the season and the scenery outside, but also to the close spousal relationship indoors, which like the spring seems dreamlike. In addition, the intimacy, romantic feelings, and even erotic connotations are suggested through decorations in the room. The recollection also goes to the eve of departure: “In the banquet, we regretted parting and candles [shed] tears in red; the person with a kindred heart [spoke beautiful] words like orchids to give Liang Hong as a present” 惜別尊前燭淚紅，同心蘭語贈梁鴻。⁴² Applying a typical imagery of candles’ tears in the parting scene, Sun implies their sadness as well as tears. By means of

⁴⁰ “Red sleeves” is a metaphor of beauty.

⁴¹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Huazhao jinei” 花朝寄內, *Tianzhenge ji*, p. 162.

⁴² *Ibid.*

the two allusions to harmonious marriage, *tongxin*⁴³ and Liang Hong,⁴⁴ the poet highlights their deep affection and mutual understandings. Furthermore, the term “lanyu” suggests both intelligence and the fragrance of her body. At the end of the poem, Sun concludes that the smile of Xi Peilan shows strong confidence in his triumph in the civil service exam; it also illuminates their relationship.

Memory is also of importance in the poetic communications between Ye Shaoyuan and Shen Yixiu. In a poem matching the rhymes with her husband, Shen depicts her remembrance as stimulated by moonlight. She recalls how they once stood behind decorated fences watching falling flowers beautifully drifting in the spring wind under the moon. Additionally, she states that “aromatic red⁴⁵ fell on two sleeves; this seems like the emergence of clouds in the Wu mountains” 雙袖落香紅，彷彿巫雲吐。⁴⁶ Besides actual descriptions, spring breeze, falling flowers, and more significantly, the clouds of the Wu mountains connoting trysts and sensual pleasure, contribute erotic associations and atmosphere. In the closing couplet, Shen states, “The bright mirror knows my heart; stand in front of the dressing terrace to reflect wholehearted affection” 明鏡知我心，台前照衷懷。⁴⁷ The mirror is not only a vehicle to represent sorrow, but also a manifestation of love. Meanwhile, however, it is still closely in line with the motif of sitting in front of a mirror in the *guiyuan* tradition.

⁴³ “Tongxin” refers to one who is a congenial companion, and by extension it also denotes the person who knows one best (*zhiji* 知己). It in addition indicates a type of knot in a pattern that looks like two connected hearts; the knot was used in wedding ceremonies to indicate faithful and constant love. Hence, it has rich connotations of two people knowing each other and of spousal love.

⁴⁴ See introduction, note 1.

⁴⁵ The term denotes flowers.

⁴⁶ Shen Yixiu, “Ganhuai he Zhongshao yun, shi zai Tiaoshang” 感懷和仲韶韻，時在茗上, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

When Ye Shaoyuan travels to Jiangyin 江陰, Shen Yixiu writes a verse expressing her yearning. Although her memory is encapsulated in an allusion to harmonious marriage, it forms a sharp contrast and deepens her longing:

柳暗行人遠，東風引夢長
Willows darken and the man traveling is afar;
East winds stretch dreams longer.
啼鴉催曙色，落絮減春光
Crying crows urge the light of early dawn;
Falling catkins diminish the spring scenery.
草亂遲膺棹，花深憶敵妝
Grass exuberantly blooming delays Li Ying's oars;⁴⁸
The color of flowers growing darker reminds me of Zhang Chang's makeup.⁴⁹
偶將紅豆擲，驚起宿鴛鴦
I randomly toss red beans⁵⁰ and startle a pair of sleeping mandarin ducks into flight.

In this poem, Shen Yixiu juxtaposes several conventional images that appear often in poems on laments in the inner chambers, which she uses to thread the whole poem. She starts the verse with “willow,” a typical image usually applied in poems on sorrows of the boudoir. It is used to indicate the person's yearnings based on the similar pronunciations between the terms for willows and staying; willows are in addition a plant commonly seen in sites of farewell. Also, the sadness at having wasted precious time, youth, and beauty and that is triggered by the falling willow catkins is a common expression of

⁴⁸ The term is the same as “yingzhou” 膺舟, which means Li Ying's 李膺 (110–69) boat. Li Ying was a celebrated official in the late Eastern Han dynasty who was famous for his integrity. When Guo Tai 郭太 (128–69), an erudite and versatile recluse scholar, met Li while traveling to Luoyang, Li appraised Guo as a marvelous talent and became good friends with him. When Guo returned to his hometown, Guo and Li took the same boat and guests gathered on the banks for farewell deemed them immortals. Afterwards, the term “yingzhou” indicates the boat of a renowned person. See Fan Ye, “Guo Tai zhuan” 郭太傳, in *Hou Hanshu*, p. 2225.

⁴⁹ Zhang Chang 張敞 (?) was an official serving Emperor Xuan of the Western Han. Zhang often penciled her eyebrows, and the shape of the eyebrows that Zhang Chang penciled was famous for its charm.

⁵⁰ In literary works, red beans symbolize romantic love and yearning.

melancholy in the subgenre of *guiyuan*. Moreover, the unwilling waking from a sweet dream that ought to be about warm memories with the beloved is likewise a widely seen depiction. The portrayal of the dream interrupted by bird crowing resonates with the previously celebrated *guiyuan*, poem about a woman who hit orioles to prevent them from trilling, since their voices aroused her dream of reunion with her lover at Liaoxi 遼西.⁵¹ As in the earlier exemplar, Shen Yixiu pens a similar description in the very last couplet. Furthermore, Shen applies other coded terms related to romantic love in Chinese literature, such as red beans and mandarin ducks, to connote her longing. Also, through the action of alarming the pair of mandarin ducks, which sharply reflect her loneliness, Shen not only expresses her jealousy but also manifests her boredom in the inner chamber. Her static gestures as displayed in this poem match the conventional image of an ideal yearning woman, too. She is completely occupied by love-sickness; in light of this, she is filled with languor and disinterest for other things outside her longing.

At variance with the tradition, Shen Yixiu slightly changes the conventional one-sided portrayal to mutual interaction by means of the allusion to Zhang Chang 張敞 (?). Zhang was a capable magistrate who lived in the capital during the reign of the Emperor Xuan of the Western Han. Zhang often helped his wife pencil her eyebrows, and legend had it that the eyebrows he penciled had a charming shape. Officials taking charge of admonition accused Zhang of the eyebrow-pencilling owing to impropriety. The emperor asked Zhang whether it was true, and Zhang replied that he had heard that there are many intimate things between husband and wife in the inner chamber that are more excessive than penciling eyebrows. “Zhang Chang penciling eyebrows” became an idiom to

⁵¹ Jin Changxu 金昌緒, “Chunyuan” 春怨, in Peng Dingqiu, ed., *Quan Tangshi*, p. 8724.

describe a close spousal relationship. Based on this, she added some “details” of their intimate spousal interaction, highlighting her own agency therein. The feeling of equality between husband and wife that is hinted at by the use of this term hints appears rarely in previous *guiyuan* verses.

The distress provoked by the separation between the spouses appears in poetic works by male literati, too. Chen Zhilin in a series of two verses sent to his wife mentions his depression while away from her. In the first piece, the author praises Xu Can as a person possessing outstanding talents and appearance among women in the entire Wu area. He also ascribes to her virtues that are rooted in her background. He then turns back to his own current situation in the second half of the poem. He dwells in the capital without family, and in the late winter, he writes this poetic letter while weeping. This concise description suggests his loneliness in the midst of a lengthy hyperborean winter and his consequent exacerbated yearning for family. His sadness worsens when he recalls the moment of farewell; the carriage that Xu took left with clouds and moved along with the road flanked by grass to an invisible end. Grass had long been a metaphor for a longing consequent upon separation, and was often used to suggest a woman’s sentiment, as in the exact use in Shen Yixiu’s poem above. In this way, the gender of the poet’s voice becomes ambiguous. In the second piece in this series, Chen focuses overtly and continually on his loneliness, absent the company of his spouse. The verse reads:

寄湘蘋 (其二) “Sending this Poem to Xiangping [i.e. Xu Can]” (second one)

吟就誰欣賞，題箋只寄君

When I finish a poem, who will appreciate it?

The works I inscribe I send only to you.

衣寒寬帶覺，枕寂遠鐘聞

My clothes are cold; I find that the belt is loose;

The pillow is silent; I hear distant sound of a bell.

舊邸尋燕徑，愁空數雁群

In our old mansion, I follow wasted paths;
 I count flocks of geese in the sorrowful sky.
 幾宵襟緒擾，隴眼夢紛紛
 Several nights turmoil racks the bosom;
 In my dimmed eyes, I dream of you repeatedly.⁵²

The author emphasizes that his solitude is not only physical but spiritual. Obviously, he regards his wife as the one who truly knows him (*zhiyin* 知音). Like many women writers, Chen attributes his emaciation to being apart from his spouse and the consequent loneliness; he uses the word “ji” 寂 to indicate both forlornness and a quiet permeating the space of the inner chamber in the absence of pillow talks between them. Furthermore, the desolation of the former dwelling represents the sweet memories that cannot return, and thus aggravates his sorrow. Also, being away from his family, he is eagerly expecting geese, indicating both epistolary communication and his connection to his family. The word “kong” 空 refers to the sky and the futility of receiving letters from home. He is plagued with depressed emotions which bring about the dreamful sleep that presumably enables him to return home for a reunion.

Similarly, Chen in a long lyric, to the Tune: “Full Garden Fragrance: Sending this One to Xiangping” 滿庭芳：寄湘蘋⁵³, reiterates his loneliness, his comfort from poetic exchanges through letters, and the importance of Xu Can in his life. When he receives the letter after its lengthy process of delivery, he feels like it was delivered by legendary animals that connote good fortune. However, after opening and reading the poem she wrote, he feels strongly the separation from her, which he likens to both of them

⁵² Chen Zhilin, “Ji Xiangping,” in *idem.*, *Fuyun ji* 浮雲集 (Harbin: Heilongjiang daxue chubanshe, 2010), p. 87.

⁵³ Chen Zhilin, To the tune: “Mantingfang: ji Xiangping,” *Fuyun ji*, p. 260.

separately witnessing the falling of dusk. Additionally, his deep affection causes him endless dreams in which he laughs while also crying. More importantly, echoing the poem above, he makes it clear that dreams are the only outlet for his earnest hope: “As long as I touch the pillow, I will meet you” 著枕便逢君.⁵⁴ In the latter half, Chen starts with feeling frustrated and ashamed about the delayed sojourn, for which he is unwilling even to clearly indicate the cause. However, letters from his wife serve him as the perfect comfort. He states, “I still own several piles of red letter papers.⁵⁵ They are from my friend in the inner chamber, who holds the red brush to prompt for the coming of spring” 猶有紅箋數疊，閨中友，彤管催春.⁵⁶ Clearly, his high regard for Xi and their equal interaction is reemphasized; her letters also provide him with a feeling of warmth, particularly in her literary works. Lastly, the author expresses his hope of returning home to drink *tusu* wine, a kind of herbal wine customarily drunk at Chinese New Year celebrations. Based on this, reunion with family is his wish for the New Year.

On particular occasions, namely festivals, the sadness of separation is exacerbated. On the Dragon Boat Festival, Chen Zhilin writes a verse to voice his longing for his beloved. The splendid blossoms in the garden seem vain in his eyes. After being reminded that the day is a holiday, he thinks about his beloved thousands of *li* away, they two separated by the two sides of a river, in an allusion to the celebrated love poem, “Jianjia” 蒹葭, in the *Shijing*. In using the term, the poet suggests that his wife is the person in whom he invests his affection. In the very last couplet, he says, “Sorrowful heart or colorful threads: which are longer?; The rain makes the vacant window damp and

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “Red letter paper” was usually used to transcribe poetic works.

⁵⁶ Chen Zhilin, To the tune: “Mantingfang: ji Xiangping,” *Fuyun ji*, p. 260.

my afternoon dream therefore becomes chilly” 愁心彩縷誰長短，雨濕虛窗午夢涼。⁵⁷

The author makes an interesting comparison between his forlornness and the custom of the festival; undoubtedly, this is meant to imply that his grief at the separation is protracted. Echoing Xu Can’s work composed on the same occasion, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, the festival custom of tying five colored threads to pray for health serves as a vehicle of their care and conjugal love. The first and the last lines hint that he is in the bedroom looking out on the garden with its resplendent flowers in a dispirited mood; the portrayal and direction of view are similar to that in *guiyuan* poetry. Furthermore, the rain, moisture, vacancy, and coldness in the closing line convey a sense of gloom as a reflection of his inner state. The tone is close to that typical *guanyuan* poetry.

In the poetic works that Xu Can sends to Chen Zhilin, one of the major themes is discussions about his choice of political career. Xu Can continually exhorts her husband to withdraw from the perilous officialdom and become a recluse. These works are analyzed in the chapter on the civil service exam. In her poetic compositions Xu writes about her emotion of yearning in a way that follows the tradition of the subgenre. In a lyric, “To the tune: Immortal Facing a River” 臨江仙, the writer indicates in the subtitle that she writes this piece in sickness.⁵⁸ Her illness results in her unawareness of time and getting up after noontime. After rising, she finds that the outside filled with snow arouses melancholy; in other words, her surroundings convey her sadness. Following this, her ailment and her longing bring about a disinterest in doing anything. She says, “Facing the

⁵⁷ Chen Zhilin, “Duanwu yi Xiangping” 端午憶湘蘋, in *Fuyun ji*, p. 148.

⁵⁸ Xu Can, To the tune: “Linjiangxian: bingzhong ji Su’an” 臨江仙: 病中寄素庵, in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*, in Li Lei, ed., *Qingdai guige shiji cuibian* 清代閨閣詩集萃編, p. 584.

mixing of jaded-green and red colors on letter paper and feeling bored at a paired phoenix. Feeling languid and almost going to rest, I force myself to write a phrase denoting safe and sound” 玉紅箋紙膩雙鸞。慊慊半息，彊寫個平安。 The paired phoenix could refer to the pattern watermarked on the letter paper or a commonly seen decoration on a mirror. Her feeling tired of the image that is directly associated with matrimonial harmony is in line with the tradition of *guiyuan* poetry that uses envy and comparison to reveal the yearning. When the term is understood as a metonym for a mirror, it also resonates with the convention of feeling jaded about dressing up after being apart from one’s spouse, she demonstrates her dispiritedness and illness, while to ease his worry, Xu also understates her condition. In this way, the poetess creates an interesting tension; considering her targeted reader, her husband, Xu Can seems implicitly to ask for his concern. However, Xu ends this lyric with a concern for Chen Zhilin’s health that involves exhorting him to not rashly try on thin clothes. Her unspoken thought reminds him to being aware of the weather and hoping that he will take good care of himself. The tone adds to this the voice of a virtuous wife.

Although Shen and Xu both compose works in the *guiyuan* mode during their separation, they are on slightly different pages. Shen was expecting her husband’s return from attending the civil service exam, whereas Xu was communicating with her spouse, who was doing a job of which she did not completely approve. In accord with this, the topic of entering officialdom or being a recluse often recurs in Xu’s poetic exchanges with Chen Zhilin, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Another source of traditional imagery of women in separation is sewing clothes for their husbands. Both Shen Yixiu and Xi Peilan convey this experience in their poems and

add in details of spousal closeness and actual depictions of tailoring. To give voice to their love and present her wifely virtue, Shen writes a serial poem titled, “I was sleepless at the windy and rainy night and got up early. It was suitable for making clothes for Zhongshao and I therefore randomly composed this piece” 風雨夜不寐早起適為仲韶製衣漫成⁵⁹. In the second verse of this series, the poetess alludes to Zhang Chang. The poem reads:

青山一點望中長，堪笑張眉學畫妝
 Green mountains in the distance look like a dot but in the field of view they are long;
 How laughable, my raised eyebrows while he learns how to do my makeup.
 羅綺可能勝駿骨，布袍元是士家常
 The eminent⁶⁰ may afford refined silks;
 Robes made from cotton clothes are essentially the common life of the household of a scholar.⁶¹

In Shen’s eyes, the funny shape of the mountains evokes her imagination about learning to pencil eyebrows as a neophyte. The hidden subject of practicing to put on makeup remains ambiguous; it could be either the poetess herself or her husband. Considering the tone of the conjugal relationship conveyed in this verse, the latter explanation fits better with the context. The wifely action, namely making clothes, in addition adds an air of intimacy due to the consideration expressed in this deed as well as the nature of clothes that closely touch the skin and body. The close atmosphere blends with a humorous savor by means of an allusion to the exemplary spousal interaction and the addition of interesting details from her real life. She recollects her laughter upon seeing the awkward eyebrows her husband penciled; in this way, the allusion is not merely a historical

exemplar but represents her actual experience of marriage. In the last two lines, Shen Yixiu praises the extraordinary ability of Ye Shoayuan, while she at the same time addition highlights the womanly virtue of willingness to endure as well as to be content with poverty.

Xi Peilan writes about the same gender-specific experience of making clothes for her husband. Nonetheless, the pictures depicted in Xi's poems reveal not only her longing for her sojourned spouse, but also provide details of sewing and other domestic duties, including caring for children.

寄衣曲 “Song of Sending Clothes to the Beloved One”

欲製寒衣下剪難，幾回冰淚灑霜紈

I would like to make winter clothing; Yet it is hard to begin using scissors;
My icy tears are shed on the snow-white woven silk several times.

去時寬窄難憑準，夢裡尋君作樣看

The size of being wide or narrow that I had before you left; it is hard to tell if
its accurate, and hard to rely on its width at the time you left;
I will look for you in my dreams and make a pattern to check.⁶²

In this short quatrain, the poetess weaves together her yearning and the process of making clothes. She firstly voices the interference due to excessive longing; it abides the lore of the subgenre to the effect that longing and sorrow effect everything in a longing woman's daily life. She also cleverly changes the convention of reunions in dreams to suit it to looking for the size and pattern of clothing. At the same time, by referencing the size of clothes, she implicitly reveals her tender concern that he is losing weight and eating well without her care. Thus, Xi Peilan, on the one hand, uses traditional imagery to express her deep longing. On the other hand, through her gender-specific actions, she displays wifely virtues including working hard and warmly taking care of her spouse. Her

consideration for the weight and eating habits of her beloved also resonates with the conventions of the subgenre in which urging one's partner to take good care of his health expresses solicitude as well as hope for the future. More importantly, the poetess astutely transforms the *guiyuan* convention of seeing the beloved in dreams due to deep yearning into a practical need to measure his figure.

In her two other poems on this topic,⁶³ Xi Peilan describes how, while tailoring winter clothing, she recalled sweet memories of ironing clothes for her husband on a snowy night. The author ingeniously blends her longing, virtues, and conjugal intimacy together in the description of a typical womanly action. In addition, Xi portrays the scene in which she just has finished sewing but has not yet added cotton that will be placed inside the garments. “It is a pity that our children are extremely ignorant; they repeatedly blow out the lamp in order to urge me to go to bed earlier” 生憐兒女無知甚，故故吹燈促蚤眠. Compared with Shen, the image of a virtuous wife and mother is more prominent in Xi's poems; from the witty depiction here, we can see that she was obviously burdened with family duties.

Long waits not only brings about depression but also incur a dissatisfaction with the situation that deviates from the gender norms for women. Shen Yixiu utters her anxiety about her husband's staying at a different place and urges him to come back home soon.

The lyric reads:

春事闌珊可怨嗟，愁看柳絮逐風斜，碧雲天際正無涯。
 Spring scenery approaches an end is worth sighing over resentfully;
 With sorrow, I see willow catkins slantingly follow winds;
 Clouds at the edge of the blue sky, which seems indeed endless.
 莫問燕台曾落日，休憐吳地有飛花，春風總不屬儂家

Do not ask the terrace of Yan,⁶⁴ used to witness sunset;
 You should not pity that there are flying flowers in the Wu region;
 Spring winds always don't belong to me.⁶⁵

The first half of this lyric is full of typical descriptions of a woman in waiting: scenery of late spring stimulates her sense of loss: willow catkins, which represent the sojourner and her yearning as well as sorrow, and a drifting in the wind toward an invisible edge of the sky. Gazing at the endless sky expresses her eagerness in expecting the return of Ye Shaoyuan. In the poem's latter half, the author, on the one hand, encourages her husband to gallantly pursue his political career. She exhorts Ye not to care about the epoch they live in, which is not one of purity and brightness in politics, by indicating the golden terrace built by the king to attract and enlist worthy men as witnessing a sunset, which connotes the sovereign loses his acumen. On the other hand, in the closing two lines, Shen expresses her negative emotion about his absence. The second line of the second stanza can have two different explanations: If the "flying flower" refers to other ladies in the Wu region, it implies Shen's warning him not to become involved in a love affair.

However, if the "flying flower" is understood as a metaphor for the feeling of the author,

⁶⁴ *Zhanguo ce* records that King Zhao of Yan desired to enhance national power and consulted on this issue Guo Wei 郭隗. Guo advised him through a fable, saying that a close attendant was looking for a fine steed for his sovereign and returned with a dead one costing five hundred *jin* 金 (gold). The sovereign was angry, but the attendant replied that once the people heard that his majesty was willing to buy a dead steed at such a high price, not to mention a live one, they would send to him as tribute true steeds. Afterwards, in one year, the sovereign had three fine steeds. King Zhao therefore built a palace and invited Guo to be his master. Shortly after this, many talented men came to the State of Yan from other states. Li Daoyuan's 酈道元 (d. 527) *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 mentions it as a golden terrace, and this appellation became prevalent in the Tang dynasty. See Liu Xiang 劉向 (77 B.C.E–6 B.C.E), comp. and ed., *Zhanguo ce jianzhu* 戰國策箋注, annots. Zhang Qingchang 張清常 and Wang Yandong 王延棟 (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 2nd printed, 1994), p. 777; Li Daoyuan, *Shuijing zhu shu* 水經注疏, annots. Yang Shoujing 楊守敬 (1839–1915), Xiong Huizhen 熊會貞 (d. 1936) and Chen Qiaoyi 陳橋驛 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji shubanshe, 1989), p. 1027; Zhou Mi 周密 (1232–98), *Qidong yeyu* 齊東野語 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), pp. 329–30.

⁶⁵ Shen Yixiu, To the tune: "Huanxisha: he Zhongshao jiyun" 浣溪紗: 和仲韶寄韻, in *Wumengtang ji*, pp. 153–54.

she then is telling her husband not to care too much about her sentiments, like the feeling that is like a falling flower, and suggesting that he should concentrate on his goal.

Whether out of jealousy or encouragement, the poetess concludes the whole verse with her strong resentment about his absence and feeling that her life therefore is desolate.

Above all, the formation of the identity of a women poet seems to result from the cooperation of both husband and wife. Thanks to the literary ability that gentry women possess, poetry serves as testimony to their spousal affection and their ability to comfort both themselves and their husband in the face of depression when he is away from home. Additionally, separation offers an occasion for male poets to express their consideration and exhortation to their wives. Furthermore, remembrance not only attests to mutual love through comparison of past and present, but also provides a space for the description of intimate relationships as a convincing evidence of that love. Interestingly enough, women poets tended to associate their works with the established tradition while at the same time trying to transform traditional images and metaphors of yearning women, while male poets would use the same conventional imagery to express their longing, and accordingly to shape an ambiguous gender voice in their works about separation.

Delay in Return or in Epistolary Reply

Sun Yuanxiang has recorded the length of time spent delivering a piece of mail from Beijing to the Jiangnan area in his poem, “Counting thirteen days from the third day of the month; when this letter arrives at your side, the moon happens to be full” 初三數起十三日，書到君邊月正圓。⁶⁶ Although it would be somewhat inaccurate to compare two

⁶⁶ Sun Yuanxiang, “Ji jiashu zuo” 寄家書作, in *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p. 21.

different periods, especially during the Ming-Qing transition and its constant warfare, we can roughly get a sense of the postal conditions at that time. The delivery did not always go so smoothly. During a separation, husbands sojourning away from their homes would delay their time of return, and lost epistolary communications were common experiences gentry wives had. On account of this theme, women poets would inevitably express their feeling of loss along with their yearning while waiting. Xi Peilan composes one of this kind to convey her mixed feelings.

望外逾期不歸 “Expecting My Husband, but He did not Return over the Promised Date”

記得扁舟放槳遲，殷勤問取早歸時

I still remembered on a small boat you were putting an oar into the water in hesitation;

I solicitously asked you about the earliest time you could return.

忽看紅樹青山影，已負黃花白酒期

Suddenly, I saw the scene of red trees and green mountains,

You had already failed to meet the appointment of yellow flowers and white wine.

情重料非言惝怳，愁多莫是病支離

I suppose the deep affection you expressed is not ambiguous;

Hopefully, the great deal of sorrow you mentioned is not because of weakness and haggardness resulting from sickness.

一緘手寄難憑準，豈是橋頭賣卜知

A letter you personally sent out: it is hard to rely on its being exact;

Could it be the diviner by the bridge who knows the date that you will return?⁶⁷

The author clearly points out in the title that the gist of this poem is her action of “expecting,” which intertwines with time changes and shifts of emotion, due to the long waits of time. At the beginning, she looks back upon their separation; both of them were reluctant to bid farewell. The delay of his departure evidently suggests their deep affection; also, through the repeated and eager requests and the poignant contrast between

⁶⁷ Xi Peilan, “Wang wai yuqi bugui,” in *Changzhen’ge ji*, p. 617.

the delayed departure and his failure to keep the appointment to return, her expectation plainly surfaces. In light of this, her yearning began to grow at the very time of leaving. Xi Peilan does not describe emotions and thoughts while waiting but jumps to a realization of the rapid passing of time. Yet, her sudden awareness implies that she is too immersed in her longing to notice the seasonal changes and the arrival of autumn. From the scenery that she depicts, namely chrysanthemums and alcohol, it is easy to speculate that Sun has postponed his return date to after the Double Ninth festival, which included customs of families gathering and drinking alcohol steeped in chrysanthemums. Additionally, trees covered with red leaves served not only as an indication of the passing of time but also as embodiments of the couple. In a poem in which Xi Peilan responds to the piece that Sun Yuanxiang composed during her sickness, she also mentions the imagery of green mountains and red trees: “Green mountains and red trees frequently [compose poems with] matching harmonious rhymes” 青山紅樹唱酬頻.⁶⁸ The tree and the mountain are portrayed as having frequent and close communications just as they did. In this present verse, the tree and the mountain still accompany each other; however, they become a contrast to the poetess, who, waiting, is portrayed as yearning and lonely. Moreover, the colorful scenes from the outside form another juxtaposition to the imagined interior atmosphere as well as to her downcast mood. In the succeeding couplet, the author turns from the outside to her inner mental state. Owing to waiting longer than expected, her emotions also undergo a change from utter expectancy to suspicion mixed with worry. She not only expresses uncertainty about his state of mind, but also cheers herself up in an effort to have more confidence. Xi also voices this underlying fear in

⁶⁸ Xi Peilan, “Da fuzi bingzhong zuo” 答夫子病中作, in *Changzhen 'ge ji*, p. 625.

other poems, such as the one in which she describes sending her cut fingernails to her husband as a present,⁶⁹ and which I analyze in the chapter on intimacy; it reveals a deep anxiety about the instability of monogamous marital relationships in the mind of a contemporary gentry wife. At the same time, she is also concerned about the physical and mental health of her husband, who is prone to illness. As time goes by, her disappointment and dissatisfaction gradually increase. The only thing that she can rely on is the promise made by Sun himself, but it turns out to be unreliable. Xi uses the identical phrase “nan pingzhun” 難憑準 (“can hardly be relied on”); one expresses sorrow and the other complaint. The repeated disappointment makes her consider seeking the aid of supernatural forces, a thought that fully displays her heartfelt hope and longing. Xi Peilan transforms a couplet from a Tang poem about a yearning woman into the very last line, which says, “There is no news about my husband; I on the contrary resent the diviner by the bridge” 自家夫婿無消息，卻恨橋頭賣卜人。⁷⁰ With the same idea of resorting to a supernatural power, by changing the original line into a rhetorical question, the feelings of powerlessness and anger are stronger. The personality of the woman is therefore more apparent.

Similarly, the transformation of allusions originally created by male literati also appear in Shen Yixiu’s work about expecting news from her beloved. A verse reads:

秋日望仲詔京報不至 “In the Autumn, Expecting the Report from Zhongshao
[i.e. Ye Shaoyuan] Being Sent from the Capital, yet it does not Come”
西風初冷碧香裾，白首高堂暮倚闥
Zephyr just chilled my blue green fragrant skirt;
White-headed parents leaned on the doorframe at dusk.
豈是上林無一雁？故教尺素杳雙魚

⁶⁹ Xi Peilan, “Yi zhijia zengwai” 以指甲贈外, in *Changzhen’ge ji*, p. 638.

⁷⁰ Shi Jianwu 施肩吾 (fl. 820), “Wangfu ci” 望夫詞, in Peng Dingqiu, ed., *Quan Tangshi*, p. 5591.

Could it be that there is not a single goose in the Shanglin garden⁷¹?
Therefore, it results in the disappearance of letters in the two-sided fish envelopes⁷².

此時王粲登樓思，何日秦嘉寄隴書

At this time, Wang Can⁷³ ascends a tower and longs;

When will Qin Jia⁷⁴ send a letter to the Long area?

吹盡白蘋波自綠，松濤桐露暮簾虛

The winds blow over all white duckweeds and the ripples are still green on their own;

Sounds of pine waves⁷⁵ and dewdrops falling down from Tung trees transmitted into the empty space behind the canopy bathing in the sunset.⁷⁶

As with Xu Can, the same theme in Shen Yixiu's work is associated with depression and loneliness. Additionally, the autumn chill aggravates the feeling of forlornness. From the very beginning, the images of having to wait for a long time in an expectant posture clearly surface. Yixiu in addition particularly emphasizes the white hair of parents to remind him of the rapidly passing time and evoke guilt in her husband's heart. Then, like

⁷¹ "Shanglin" is the name of the imperial garden of the Qin and Han dynasties. Later, this term became a general phrase referring to imperial gardens. Here the author uses this term to indicate the capitol and to imply his success of the exam, since the new degree holders would attend a celebratory banquet in the garden.

⁷² See note 25.

⁷³ Wang Can (177–217) was regarded by later literary critics as the champion of the seven famous literati in the Jian'an 建安 era for the Wei 魏 kingdom. When escaping the chaos in northern China, Wang fled to Jingzhou 荊州 in Sichuan. While taking refuge in Jingzhou, he wrote the celebrated "Denglou fu" 登樓賦 ("Rhapsody of Ascending Tower"), which describes him climbing up a tower and longing for his homeland. See Liu Xie 劉勰 (465–522), *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, annot. Fan Wenlan 范文瀾 (1893–1969) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2006), p. 700; Wang Can, "Denglou fu," in *Wen Xuan* 文選, ed. Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–31), annot. Li Shan 李善 (630–89) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), pp. 489–93.

⁷⁴ Qin Jia, an Eastern-Han poet, was famous for his poems addressed to his beloved wife. According to the short editorial preface that precedes the poem, it records that the reason of composition was that Qin Jia needed to transfer to a new post in the capital. Yet, at that time his wife Xu Shu 徐淑, who was also a poet, went back to her natal family and was sick, so they were unable to bid farewell in person. In light of this, Qin Jia wrote a series of three poems to express his yearning to his wife. Xu Shu also left one extant poem replying to and echoing her husband's yearning. Qin Jia and Xu Shu afterwards became an epitome of a loving couple in Chinese poetry. Poems by Qin Jia and Xu Shu were first collected in *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠. See Xu Ling 徐陵 (507–83), comp., *Yutai xinyong jianzhu* 玉臺新詠箋注, annot. Wu Zhaoyi 吳兆宜 (fl. 1672), ed. Mu Kehong 穆克宏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), pp. 30–32.

⁷⁵ When winds pass through pine trees, the sound is similar to waves. Hence, "pine wave" is used to describe the sound.

⁷⁶ Shen Yixiu, "Qiuri wang Zhongshao jingbao buzhi," in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 66.

Xi Peilan, she expresses discontent by means of a rhetorical question. The imperial garden that she points out clearly suggests that the purpose of Ye Shaoyuan's journey is to attend the civil service exam. Meanwhile, the suggestion also explains that his parents are on their tiptoes with expectation of receiving the good news. Additionally, the garden and the lack of geese and fish form a sharp contrast following an expression of dissatisfaction. In latter half of this piece, the poetess applies the allusion of Wang Can and Qin Jia to make a clever twist. By juxtaposing the two figures and connecting them with the verb "yearning," Shen creates an ambiguity: Wang could be immersed in his longing in general or could be specifically wondering when Qin would send the letter. On the one hand, Wang climbed up a tower overlooking the scenery and thus longed for his homeland. From this perspective of Wang as a symbol, Shen is imagining her husband as also yearning for home and family. On the other hand, considering how together with the following line that uses the allusion of Qin Jia, who was famous for his poetic exchanges with his wife, Wang Can is more likely to serve as a parallel to the author herself, expecting a note from afar, too. Interesting enough, here she is not only in line with the tradition of male literati, but even impersonates a male scholar. In this way, by choosing not to use allusions to a female figure, she erases the conventional image of a yearning woman, while suggesting an interaction between a pair of same-sex friends. Additionally, Wang Can's laments about the passing and waste of time echo the emotions Shen expresses during the wait as well. To conclude this verse, Shen similarly returns to the colorful outside scenery; following the direction of the west winds, readers then are shown the empty inner chamber, which feels even more spacious and lonely through sounds of pines tree shaking and dew dropping.

Slightly differently from Shen and Xi, Xu Can closely follows the tradition, both ideologically and generically, to state her sentiment of desolation in her *ci*. The *ci* reads: “To the tune: The Butterfly Loves Flowers on Having Some Sentiments about Every Time I Send a Letter to Su’an, but Never Arrives in His Hands” 蝶戀花：每寄書素庵不到有感：

頻寄錦書鴻不去，怕近黃昏，簾幕深深處。
 I have been frequently sending letters on brocades⁷⁷, but geese do not go there;
 Afraid of the time when dusk is approaching,
 I hide deeply in the place covered by layers of curtains.
 一寸橫波愁幾許。啼痕點點成紅雨。
 How much sorrow is contained in a pair of tiny transverse waves?⁷⁸
 Tear stained dot after dot become red raindrops.
 倚遍闌干無意緒。閒理餘香，獨自為誰語。
 Leaning all over the railings, no mood for anything.
 With leisure, I tidy up remnants of incense;
 I am alone for whom I am talking.
 盡日慊慊如夢裡，斜陽一瞬人千里。
 The entire day, I am weak and weary as if I were dreaming.
 Sunset disappears in a short time and the beloved person is still thousands of *li*
 away.⁷⁹

Due to repeated letdowns resulting from lost communication with her husband, she is utterly immersed in the sadness and yearning that are the traditional staples of the subgenre. Xu is embittered by her letters constantly failing to get through. Accordingly, she finds it unbearable to observe flying geese, which represent messengers between the couple, and yet bringing back nothing but what dismays her again. From this perspective, she is completely immersed in sadness and yearning, hiding in a small and dark space

⁷⁷ “Jinshu” could indicate letters written in a flowery language. Also, it refers to Su Hui’s ingenious poetic works that were woven on brocades sending to her husband.

⁷⁸ “Hengpo” not only denotes to waves flowing transversely, but also symbolizes the expression in a woman’s eyes flowing like transverse waves. Also, this term can refer generally to women’s eyes.

⁷⁹ Xu Can, To the tune: “Dielianhua: mei jishu Su’an budao yougan,” in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*, p. 585.

behind the curtains, which represents and vividly visualizes her downcast mood. In addition to waiting in deep sorrow, Xu Can also follows the traditional pattern that endeavors to portray the woman as losing interest in all other things while longing for her sojourning beloved. The remnant of incense suggests her staying alone in the boudoir for a long time, but also the scents left by her husband. The absence prompts the author to become more conscious of her loneliness, which is displayed in her realization of the uselessness of stirring the incense ash, as well as in her confession of lacking an audience for conversation. Sadly, when she falls asleep at night, her husband does not appear in her dreams, but remains in an unreachable place. According to the traditional Chinese idea, when people meet in their dreams, this expressions an underlying mutual yearning; in other words, it suggests that not only are physical and epistolary communications discontinuous, but also that underlying mental interaction is a unidirectional longing. From this perspective, her inability to dream about her spouse deepens her sorrow of losing contact.

As the ones leaving home and having fuller mobility, male literati rarely express a downcast mood owing to their inability to maintain contact with family members. Fortunately, in Chen Zhilin's collected works, there are two short verses about his loss of connection with his family while in exile in Manchuria. He tries to explain to himself that, owing to the remoteness of his location, it is even harder to receive letters. Chen even calculates that, "Crossing over three thousand and seven hundred *li*, the letter has only gotten as far as Yantai" 三千七百里, 才只到燕台.⁸⁰ Yantai is the northern part of Hebei 河北 Province, where the capitol was located; the vast distance again shows the

⁸⁰ Chen Zhilin, "Wang jiashu buzhi" 望家書不至, in *Fuyun ji*, p. 221.

difficult and time-consuming character of epistolary delivery. The clear estimation also suggests his eager expectation. Chen's sentiments intensify when the separation becomes prolonged. In the other quatrain, he states that as he is being detained in the region beyond the Great Wall, far from his family, which is living in Jiangnan ten thousand *li* away, he has lost communication with them since the previous fall. The poet furthermore indicates, "I am afraid that it would increase the tears of the sojourner in the distant land; Because not a family member does not send letters" 恐增遷客天涯淚，不是家人不寄書。⁸¹ His tears grow in his isolation. When his family, especially his wife, who was the only one sending him letters, stops the communication, he loses his sole addressee, exacerbating his isolation. Resonating with the loneliness expressed in Xu Can's lyric, Chen likewise regards his spouse as the most important audience for his very personal voice. During their separation, the interruption of their epistolary communication undoubtedly had an emotional impact on both husband and wife. The interaction on paper between the spouses serves as important mental comfort for both of them, especially during his solitude. However, at the same time, this suggests that only in a peculiar situation such as exile, which for a man largely restricts his social life, do husbands express similar feelings to their wives. This clearly reveals the gender segregation and thus a difference between genders in emotions and reactions.

In sum, facing the failure of letter delivery, women poets followed the tradition in poetry of yearning women, while simultaneously diverging from it. Indeed, the basic tone of this group of poems is sorrowful; yet, unlike the immersion of male literati in a monotonous sadness, they present various emotions including worry, suspicion, and

⁸¹ Chen Zhilin, "Jiu bude jiashu" 久不得家書, in *Fuyun ji*, p. 232.

discontent. Additionally, male and female poets manifest similar emotional responses in the condition of disconnection from the family. Also, the gender difference in their descriptions is particularly obscured in poetry, which places relatively more restraint on emotional expressions. On the contrary, in *ci*, as a genre that concentrates more on poets' emotions tended to drown in grief and depression. From this perspective, lyrical works are more likely to conform to the conventions. Nonetheless, for men, writing in a feminine tone in fact requires exceptional occasions, which catalyze their sentiments and allow a legitimate verbalization. To women authors, a secluded environment resulted in a stronger attachment to their spouses. However, unlike precedent male poets who focused on the yearning woman herself, women authors would sometimes broaden the scope to include their family, thus affirming their obligations in life.

The End of Separation: Return

The ending of a separation, needless to say, betokened a reunion with great pleasure. Although the number of poetic works of this kind is not ample, Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan, the only couple who left us a portrayal of their meetings after a long separation, nicely present their joy and mutual affection within their poetic exchanges. Right next to the poem on Sun Yuanxiang's being overdue for the appointed meeting, Xi Peilan records her ecstasy at his surprising return. At the same time, she shows her involvement in various familial roles: wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. The poem reads:

喜外竟歸 “I was Cheerful that My Husband Unexpectedly Returned Home”
 曉窗幽夢忽然驚，破例今朝鶻噪晴
 The dawn showing itself through the window, I was] suddenly roused from a
 sorrowful dream;
 Differently from usual, this morning magpies were chirping on a sunny day.
 指上正掄歸路日，耳邊已聽入門聲

While counting on my fingers how many days my husband would spend on the way home,
 In my ears, I already heard the sound of him entering the door.
 縱憐面目風塵瘦，猶睹襟懷水月清
 Even though taking pity on him since noticing his thinness from the exhausting journey,
 I still see his mind and ambition as clearly as the moon on the water.
 好向高堂勤慰問，敢先兒女說離情
 Just right in attentively express greetings and solicitude to parents;
 How do I dare to pour out my sentiment about separation before the children do?⁸²

To narrate the feeling of surprise, the author describes her startled awakening from dreaming, which likely relates to the melancholy derived from being apart from her husband. Conceivably, she did not sleep well and so was easily awakened by the sound of the birds. Despite the fact that the verse opens with a typical circumstance of *guiyuan*, some clues, such as her surprise and the omen of the magpie, direct readers to an utterly different outcome. First of all, the magpies betoken auspiciousness in Chinese tradition. Furthermore, from the idiom, “after a long rainy period, the chirping of magpie signals that it is going to clear up” 久雨鵲噪晴, suggests that her mood is turning from gloomy to bright. Given this, her unusual awakening could be understood as expressing a mysterious connection and response to Sun Yuanxiang. The astonishment reaches a climax in the next couplet revealing the contrast between her eager expectation and his actual return. The surprising effect was strengthened through the strong pronunciation of the word “zheng” 正. In the portrayal of their reunion, Xi Peilan displays on the one hand a common wife’s concern for the health of her husband and compassion for his toil. As an understanding spouse, she was able to discern his lofty spirit and morals, which

⁸² Xi Peilan, “Xi wai jing gui,” in *Changzhen 'ge ji*, p. 617.

would not be stained by his struggle to climb the social ladder through the civil service exam, nor the consequent exhausting trip. However, following this, Xi chooses to step back into the family setting. By letting her husband first give his regards to his parents, his and her virtues as a filial son and worthy wife, are brought to the fore. She even feels the need to place herself as inferior to their children. From her use of the word “gan” 敢 (dare), the constraint and self-regulation of a gentry wife in her household are quite apparent. Furthermore, unlike affection between parents and descendants, which can be publicly shown, the connubial relationship was expected to retreat back into the inner chamber.

In a poem written on the occasion of returning from attending the civil service exam in the capital, Sun is relaxed and lighthearted. Evidently, having Xi Peilan as a companionate spouse at home provides him with great comfort. The poem reads:

還家示內 “Returning Home, I Present this Poem to My Wife”
 一笑輕裝掃葉空，依然潑茗畫堂東
 With one smile, my light pack empties as soon as like wind sweeping fallen leaves;
 We still spill tea⁸³ in the east side of the sumptuous hall.⁸⁴
 遠歸祇覺貧俱好，天道無如熱最公
 Returning from afar, I feel only that poverty is all good;
 Under the Way of Heaven, there is nothing as fair as heat.
 別後新詩互商畧，眼前家事且朦朧
 We discuss and evaluate new poems after our farewell to each other;
 Affairs in the family at present have temporarily become obscure.
 同心喜得黔婁婦，荊布看來黻佩同

⁸³ “Poming” refers to an anecdote in which Li Qingzhao and her husband, Zhao Mingcheng, would compete in memorizing. The winner would be granted a drink of tea. Li often would laugh too hard and cause tea to spill on her lap.

⁸⁴ One of Li Shangyin’s 李商隱 (813–58) celebrated untitled poems recalls his past romance with a lady. The first line says, “[Thanking the] stars and winds last night, [we were at] the east side of the luxuriant hall [located at] the west side of the gorgeous decorated tower” 昨夜星辰昨夜風，畫樓西畔桂堂東。 Following this, he continues to depict how they crushed each other in the banquet and he was forced to depart since he had to go to work. Here Sun transforms the allusion from premarital romance into an intimate conjugal relationship. See Li Shangyin, *Yuxisheng shiji jianzhu* 玉谿生詩集箋注, annot. Feng Hao 馮浩 (1719–1801) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1979), pp. 133–35.

For one with the same heart, I delightfully got one who is like the wife of Qian Lou;⁸⁵

It seems that she regards the hairpin made from bramble and the skirt of cotton cloth as same as the ribbon tying the official signet.⁸⁶

The entire verse is imbued with the cheerfulness of returning home. Through laughter, which dissolves all of the frustration he encountered while taking the civil service exam as well as difficulties on the road, and the quickness with which he unpacked his baggage, his excitement clearly surfaces. Additionally, the joy of coming back evokes his feeling of comfort and desire to beautify everything he finds at home. He playfully blends bitterness and jocularly, considering that there is no way to predict the fate decided by the heaven in his failure in the exam, while observing that the hot weather in summer⁸⁷ is the same whether one is in Beijing or Jiangnan. More significantly, Sun highlights the spousal intimate literary activity suggested through the allusion to Li Qingzhao, who often competed with her husband over their ability to memorize allusions and accuracy, as the very first thing they did after his return. Also, by using the term “still” and the phrase “the east side of the sumptuous hall,” alluding to Li Shangyin’s poem about his past romantic experience with a lady at a banquet in a gorgeous hall, Sun refers to his sweet memories with Xi as unchanging over time. Moreover, this is immediately attested

⁸⁵ Qian Lou is a hermit in the Warring States period. He declined several offers from different lords and continued to live a humble and plain life. When Qian passed away, Zengzi came to offer his condolences. Zeng had a conversation with Qian’s wife about Qian’s great integrity and virtue. She said, “The master savored the world’s blandest tastes and was content with the world’s most humble rank. He was not distressed by poverty or the lowness of his position, and he was not pleased by wealth and honor. He sought benevolence and obtained benevolence. He sought righteousness and obtained righteousness. . . .” Zengzi said, “No one but this man would have such a wife.” A man of discernment would say, “Qian Lou’s wife was happy in poverty and practiced the Way.” More details about Qian Lou’s wife, see Liu Xiang, *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü zhuan of Liu Xiang*, trans. Anne Kinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 38–39.

⁸⁶ Sun Yuanxiang, “Huanjia shinei,” in *Tianzhen’ge ji*, p. 169.

⁸⁷ According to the order of this poem, which is placed between a verse penned on the fifteenth day of the sixth month of the lunar calendar and another impromptu composition at a banquet held on the ninth day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar, it is reasonable to conjecture that Sun’s trip is in summer time.

in the third couplet: they interact like same-sex poetic friends and are so devoted to each other that they momentarily ignore their family duties. This at the same time evidences concern for the impact of a close conjugal relationship on the family system.

The other emphasis is poverty. The warmth of family as well as close spousal relationship prompts him to not only forget his own hardship but also feel content with the impoverished situation. Meanwhile, he makes a gesture of disinterest about striving for success in the capital, and declares his willingness to paying more attention to his beloved woman. In addition, in the closing couplet, Sun parallels his wife to the worthy wife of a historical figure famous for her humble contentment and not desirous of wealth or honor. Based on this, the poet suggests, Xi Peilan possesses great virtue like her predecessor, who will virtuous enough to aid her husband in the exam. Moreover, he once more mentions his wife as “tongxin,” a term with romantic connotations. His delight results from the fact that they have same interests and values.

Possibly on the same occasion, Xi Peilan presents a relatively calm attitude in a verse titled, “I was Cheerful Zixiao [i.e., Sun Yuanxiang] Returned from the Capital” 喜子瀟歸自京師.⁸⁸ Yet, here Xi Peilan manifests the opposite attitude to that in her previous poem. Rather than roundabout suggestion, she straightforwardly articulates her yearning during the separation. She describes the waiting as seemingly endless, and the longing in her heart as strong and indomitable. She said, “*fosang* trees completely wither and the sea has dried; there only remains a single tree of mutual yearning” 枯盡佛桑乾卻海，單留一樹是相思. The *fosang* tree is mythical plant that is extremely tall and large, and grow in pairs with both trees sharing the same roots. They lean on each other. The

⁸⁸ Xi Peilan, “Xi Zixiao gui zi jingshi,” in *Changzhen’ge ji*, p. 655.

withering connotes not only a long period of expectation, but also her downcast inner state. In addition, the depiction of a pair of intertwining trees becoming a representation of her lonely waiting and yearning. Following this, she states Sun Yuanxiang returns home with weariness and laziness. Along with his defeat in the exam, this mood stimulates her worry that “who is able to treat Xiangru for the poverty that only has a four-wall house” 誰療相如四壁窮. Notably, as the one actually managing the family finances, she is not as sanguine as her husband. Sun resorts to poetic creation to balance his loss in his political career, and the poetess likewise ends the series with mention of the power of literature: “In the clear night, the spirit of poetry has no place to depend on; It transforms into the bright moon appearing in the sky” 清夜詩魂無著處, 化作明月立當空. This suggests comfort to her spouse to the effect that their poetry could possess an eternal life like the moon.

When dispensing with the burden of striving for an official position, Sun’s poetic record upon his return from an excursion is unquestionably permeated with happiness. In another verse titled, “On the Day Returning Home, I Playfully Compose This Poem” 歸家日戲作,⁸⁹ he stresses the importance of poetic creation in his conjugal relationship. He describes putting down the sack in which he has stored his poems written on the road: “Fortunately, there are newly composed verses that I expect to meticulously discuss with his wife” 恰有新詩待細商. Clearly, he deems Xi Peilan not only an important and highly likely first reader, but also a possible editor of his works. In addition, the poet also portrays a scene of family gathering filled with joy and harmony: “My heart still clings

⁸⁹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Guijia ri xizuo,” in *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p. 237.

on the aromatic snowy sea, while wife and children fall over themselves to ask me about the scenery of the homeland of white clouds⁹⁰” 心目尚縈香雪海，妻孥爭問白雲鄉。

Facing their curious questions, Sun states, “despite the fact that there were many majestic places hard to describe in details” 儘多奇境難詳述, they can refer to his new poems.

This shows that sharing his travel experiences and having conversations among family members were a common practice. Meanwhile, the importance of poetry is again assured.

Interestingly, apart from poems, he also brings back another present for her; he humorously states, “Floral scent exists on the collar of a green robe; for you, [I] nicely and properly fold it and place in the bamboo case” 一領青衫花氣在，為儂好好疊筠箱。

In light of this, their interaction is similar to that of a married couple in the modern sense in which the husband not only completely understands the fondness of his wife but also takes particular care to preserve an ephemeral sensation, namely the scent, for her pleasure. Also, along with his poetic works, this furthermore enables her to vividly imagine the beautiful landscapes he once witnessed. More significantly, to express their intimacy, the poet performs an action usually categorized as a woman’s duty, creating thereby a sense of equality.

When receiving the message that Xu Can will soon arrive, Chen Zhilin passionately composes a *ci* to narrate his delight. He describes how he has dreamt about her coming thousands of times, and it finally has come true. The sharp contrast at the beginning sets

⁹⁰ The Dengwei 鄧尉 mountain located in Jiangsu province grows exuberant plum trees. When they blossom, plum flowers cover the entire mountain. The strong fragrance wafts everywhere and the appearance is like a vast expanse of snow as broad as the sea. During the Kangxi reign, the magistrate of Jiangsu inscribed “xiangxuehai” on the cliff and this term therefore became a sobriquet of Dengwei and a general term referring to a forest of plum trees. “Baiyunxiang” denotes the place where the immortals reside. Here the author uses it to indicate spectacular scenery, not necessarily with Daoist connotations.

the basic tone of happiness. Apart from this, after undergoing lots of alarming danger, namely crises in his political career, he celebrates their luck in managing to remain alive. In the latter part of the piece, Chen states that he expects that they can “together unfold their old works in front of the lamp and compete to compose new lyrics under the flowers” 舊卷燈前同展，新詞花底爭裁。⁹¹ Evidently, as with Sun and Xi, in Chen and Xu’s life, literary activities are an important means for them to find amusement and therefore share intimacy. Consequently, the poet articulates with affection his earnest hope: “The kindred knot should be long bound and not easily untied; from now on I am willing to be your silk belt” 同心長結莫輕開，從此願為羅帶。⁹² He not only hopes that in their companionate marriage they will maintain their fondness for each other but also continue to long for further physical closeness. By replanting the allusion from Tao Qian’s 陶潛 (ca. 365–427) “Xianqing fu” 閒情賦 (“Rhapsody of Appeasement of Affection”)⁹³ in the soil of a marital relationship, he reinforces a sense of intimacy and a strong will to tie the bond of marriage.

In conclusion, these poetic works again clearly demonstrate that poetry played a crucial role in tying the companionate couple together. It creates a space enabling them to hold discussions on poetic techniques and intellectual topics; in addition, it is a method to

⁹¹ Chen Zhilin, To the tune: “Xijingyue: Xiangping jiangzhi” 西江月：湘蘋將至, in *Fuyun ji*, p. 246.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ In this rhapsody, Tao portrays a gorgeous beauty and his strong affection for her. Tao states ten wishes, in each of which he imagines becoming something that can be close to her body. However, right after each wish, he feels disappointed that the thing will eventually detached from her. For example, he says, “I wish to become the collar of her cloth to receive the lingering aroma from her gorgeous face, but I lament that her silk clothes would be taken off at night and I resent that the autumn night is not yet going to end. I wish to become the belt of her skirt to girdle her slender waist, but I deplore that in the changes between warm and chilly weather she may take off the old belt and wear a new one” 願在衣而為領，承華首之餘芳；悲羅襟之宵離，怨秋夜之未央。願在裳而為帶，束窈窕之纖身，嗟溫涼之異氣，或脫故而服新。 See Tao Qian, *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu* 陶淵明集箋注, annot. Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), pp. 448–59.

comfort themselves within an impoverished life. More importantly, the four poems on the return of Sun Yuanxiang and the *ci* by Chen Zhilin patently showcase the gender differences. Both Sun and Chen overtly mention their enjoyment in sharing their literary interests with their spouses; the joy that deeply captivates Sun attests to the destructively distracting power that the companionate marital relationship can possess. Nevertheless, differently from Sun's unabashedly placing the emphasis on the close interaction between partners within their literary activity and daily life, the poetess on the contrary not only structurally juxtaposes spousal affection and understanding with a familial ethics, but submits the former to the latter. Obviously, family was the entire world of the gentry women, while at the same time it was a realm in which they could establish a virtuous self-image. Moreover, male poets were allowed to publicly express affection for their wives by means of metaphor as well as considerate action. However, as a gentry wife, Xi Peilan could only conceal her care for her husband under concern about his health, while leaving yearning unseen in the boudoir.

Death as Permanent Separation

Undoubtedly, for men and women, the death of close family members would have a tremendous impact on those who remained. Lamenting or weeping over the dead thus became a common motif in poetry. *Daowang* 悼亡 (mourning the deceased) is a subgenre, which was first attributed to Pan Yue 潘岳 (247–300), who wrote a set of three elegies to mourn his late wife. After Pan Yue, *daowang* poems were usually comprised of multiple verses, and the name referred particularly to lamenting the loss by husbands of their wives, and vice versa. The tone of *daowang* works shifted from the

lugubrious and emotionally centered to the creation of vivid images of the late wife and personal sorrow. In addition, during the late imperial period, the techniques applied in mourning poems could be categorized into four: sadness triggered by scenery, things the deceased used, dreams of the dead, and illusory images of the late partner.⁹⁴ During the late Ming and Qing dynasties, many women poets began to follow the tradition that precedent male literati had set up, appropriating it to demonstrate their wifely virtues and literary talents. In addition, the act of mourning allowed women to publicly express their affection for their husbands. By arguing that mourning serves as one way of “communication,” this section explores what topics Ye Shaoyuan and Gu Taiqing chose to discuss with their late partners, and the gender differences involved. This section will introduce first Gu and then Ye. Gu showcases the whole process of her recovery, while Ye is comparatively traditional.

As Yihui’s spouse, Taiqing underwent a process of mourning twice: one for Yihui’s primary wife, Miaohua, and the other for Yihui himself. In the autumn of 1830, when Yihui was on duty at the Eastern imperial tomb accompanied by Taiqing, Miaohua passed away in Beijing. Taiqing wrote two verses⁹⁵ about offering sacrifices to Miaohua when taking on her responsibility as a concubine and also express her condolences. Yihui composed a series of mourning poems⁹⁶ and in his self-annotations to them, he transcribed the sutra that Buddha bequeathed before his nirvana and Yihui’s own poem

⁹⁴ Hu Xu 胡旭, *Daowang shishi* 悼亡詩史 (Shanghai: Dongfang chuban zhongxin, 2010), pp. 1–8.

⁹⁵ Gu Taiqing, “Qiyue sanri furen ji’nian qian wuer Zaizhao wang ji, tong cheng yi jueju” 七月三日夫人期年遣五兒載釧往祭, 痛成一絕句, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 48; “Shui Zai Jun xinfu ye furen binsuo” 率載鈞新婦謁夫人殯所, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 217.

⁹⁶ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Gupenge jiuzhang zhang siju” 鼓盆歌九章章四句, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, pp. 489–90.

titled “Song of Jade Horse” 玉馬歌⁹⁷, both as objects to be buried in her tomb. In addition to their shared memories of the marriage, throughout the whole series, Yihui manifests a tension between his grief and the Buddhist doctrine that endeavors to eliminate all kinds of emotions and desires: “With tears, [I] personally placed the Buddhist sutra into [the coffin] and sealed it” 手把金經和淚封 and “The Buddhist sutra and ‘Jade Horse’ are unable to bear my sentiments” 金經玉馬不勝情. Yihui also laments that afterwards he would “Sitting on the couch in meditation until the hair on his temples whitened like silk and felt broken-hearted alone” 鬢絲禪榻獨傷神. Interestingly, about two years later, Taiqing in her congratulatory birthday poem repeats this line as “Sitting on the couch in meditation until the hair on our temples whitened like silk, we accompanied each other” 禪榻鬢絲相結伴.⁹⁸ Giving a promise to her husband he would not be alone, Gu comforts him in his sadness and encourages him for the future.

When Yihui later passed away, Gu Taiqing composed many verses to express her grief at the loss of her beloved spouse. Over the course of three years following his demise, Taiqing experienced not only banishment but also the destruction of their villa by the legitimate son. Based on these incidents, her poems of mourning became a means to voice her sadness as well as to communicate to her late husband about her current life. Also, from the poems Gu composed in the four years after her husband’s death, readers can trace the mitigation of her deep woes.

Yihui died in the summer of 1838 and the winter of that year, Taiqing penned a poem to record her sorrow. In the title, she narrates in detail her reason for the

⁹⁷ Unfortunately, this poem is not found in the current version of Yihui’s collected works.

⁹⁸ Gu Taiqing, “Guisi zhengyue shiliuri ci fuzi shengri yuanyun” 癸巳正月十六日次夫子生日原韻, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 382.

composition. She aimed to mourn the deceased, to express her anguish triggered by the sharp differences, to find a legitimate reason to live as a widow, and to enable her children to understand the toil and hardships she had undergone, as she wrote in the following text:

自先夫子薨逝後,意不為詩.冬窗檢點遺稿,卷中詩多唱和,觸目感懷,結習難忘,遂賦數字,非敢有所怨,聊記予生之不幸也.兼示釗初兩兒

“Since My Late Husband Passed away, I Decided against Composing Poetry. By the Winter Window, I Managed the Manuscript he Bequeathed, which Contained Many Verses Matched in Harmonious Rhymes. Witnessing this, I Felt Sentimental along with a Stubborn Habit that was for a Long Time Hard to Forget. I therefore Penned Several Words. It is not that I Dare to Resent My Unfortunate Life, but Wanted Just to Record. Also, It Was to Be Presented to My Two Sons, Zhao and Chu”

昏昏天欲雪,圍爐坐南榮.
The sky is dusky; it is going to snow.
We sit at the southern side of the house circling the stove with its warm fire.

開卷讀遺編,痛極不成聲.
Opening the books to read the works you left,
I felt extremely pained and unable to make any voice.

況此衰病身,淚多眼不明.
Not to mention this weak and ill body;
with so many tears, my eyes were not clear.

仙人自登仙,飄然歸玉京.
The immortal ascended to the celestial world by himself;
Swiftly and unrestrainedly returned to the Jade capital of the immortal world.

有兒性痴頑,有女年尚嬰.
We have sons whose dispositions are stupid and obstreperous;
We have daughters who are still really young.

斗粟與尺布,有所不能行.
Owing to the disputes between brothers,
there are some things that cannot be done.

陋巷數椽屋,何異空谷情?
Living in several houses located in a mean narrow lane;
How does this differ from the situation of seclusion in a spacious and serene valley?

嗚嗚兒女啼,哀哀搖心旌.
Loudly sons and daughters cry;
My mind is shaken by endless griefs.

幾欲殉泉下,此身不敢輕.
I almost desire to sacrifice my life to following you to the netherworld;
Yet, I do not dare to belittle my body by committing suicide.

賤妾豈自惜？為君教兒成。

How can your humble wife cherish herself?

For your sake, I will teach our sons until they reach adulthood.⁹⁹

Basically, the author follows the tradition of the subgenre of *daowang* that focuses on the sorrows evoked from possessions left by the dead. Poetic works and poetic exchanges had a special meaning connoting how poetry played a significant role in conjugal relationships and served to strengthen bonds. Additionally, to abide by poetic as well as gender regulations, the poetess still needed to defend herself as not writing out of resentment. Like other widowed women poets, Gu Taiqing also needed to justify not following her husband in death. Raising and teaching their children became her foremost goal for the rest of her life. As Grace Fong astutely argues, in the practice of composing mourning poems, the woman writer as commemorator not only preserved her late husband's virtue and deeds in a poetic voice but also found a place for herself.¹⁰⁰ In this way, as an educator, she had a legitimate reason to continue her life and affirm the meaning of her existence, while, as this was tightly bound with the accomplishments of her sons, it was also the only way to glorify Yihui, on the other. On top of her great loss, the strong disagreement between the legitimate son and her own son resulted in her having to leave the mansion with her children and move to a temporary rental house. The poignancy of this was even stronger.

The following year, Gu wrote another typical poem of mourning on her birthday.¹⁰¹ She describes the coldness and emptiness in her living space and in her heart. When

⁹⁹ Gu Taiqing, "Zi xianfuzi hongshi hou, buyi weishi. dongchuang jiandian yigao, juanzhong shi dou change, chumu gahuai, jiexi nanwang, sui fu shuzi, fei gan yousuoyuan, liaoji yusheng zhi buxing ye. jian shi Zhao, Chu lianger," in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 233.

¹⁰⁰ Grace Fong, "Private Emotion, Public Commemoration," p. 30.

¹⁰¹ Gu Taiqing, "Jihai shengri ku xianfuzi" 己亥生日哭先夫子, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 236.

thinking about the drastic differences between the same date the previous year and her present loss, her heartache and tears are ceaseless. Although she tries to console herself with Buddhist philosophy that regards both life and death as illusions, she still cannot move beyond her deep sorrow and regret. Her sadness reaches a climax when she realizes that she is unable to present all of her feelings to her husband as she had done before. Later, on the Clear Bright Festival, a day for ancestor worship and tomb sweeping, she states a similar feeling of being obstructed: “In sacrificing for worship, it is hard to present the emotions and realities of a widow” 俎豆難陳寡婦情。¹⁰² Despite the impossibility of communication, she still talks to Yihui about her current life: “Worries and toil in recent days become ailments; yet, the dreams of those past years are vivid and clear” 近日憂勞成疾病，經年魂夢卻分明。¹⁰³ In another *ci* presented to her cousin-in-law,¹⁰⁴ Taiqing candidly expresses that it is not permissible for a member of a royal family to supplicate for help, since no one would find it credible; considering this, there is no way for her to convey her feelings. She then wonders if her deceased spouse still has concerns about her. When she drafts the poems used to summon Yihui’s soul, she finds that the task seems endless. She is unable to finish the draft not only because of her anguish but also due to the many things that she would like to tell her late husband but that are unspeakable.

Two years after Yihui passed away, Taiqing on her birthday wrote another mourning verse in a calmer voice:

¹⁰² Gu Taiqing, “Jihai Qingming shui Zaizhao gongye xianfuzi yuanqin, tong cheng yilü” 己亥清明率載 釗恭謁先夫子園寢，痛成一律，in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 237.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Gu Taiqing, To the tune: “Jinlüqu: shang Ding junwang Yunlin zhuren” 金縷曲：上定郡王筠鄰主人，in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 659.

庚子生日哭先夫子 “Weeping for My Late Husband on My Birthday in the Gengzi Year”
 四十二年如夢過，東風暖日又新春
 Forty-two years passed like a dream;
 In eastern winds and warm sun, the new spring comes again.
 半生勞碌憑誰話，兩字浮休寄此身
 Exhausting toil lasting for half of my life; to whom I [can] talk about it?
 Between life and death, I temporarily lodge my body.
 觀化暫能忘俗累，餐書或可療清貧
 Observing changes in the world can temporarily make me forget the burdens of mundaneness;
 Eating books may enable me to heal my complete poverty.
 九泉寄語須相待，獨坐挑燈淚滿巾
 Send word to the netherworld saying that you ought to wait for me;
 Under a lamp, I sit alone and tears are all over the whole handkerchief.¹⁰⁵

Compared to the previous year, the poetess begins with a scene that is warm, bright, and full of hope rather than gloomy. However, on the occasion of her birthday, inevitably, she still thinks about her past and the loss of the one who understood her. Taiqing tries to comfort herself with Daoist ideology; she even adds the slight humor of the reference to “eating books,” that is, reading, to highlight and exaggerate her condition of impoverishment. Also, through the use of chiasmus, both reading and religious cultivation serve as remedies to overcome the hardships in her life. The ending couplet evidently shows the importance of poetry in this harmonious relationship.

Six months after, Taiqing composed a piece after offering a sacrifice to Yihui’s tomb, which was rebuilt from their former villa. The writer describes the desolate situation as follows: “The tomb of a duke has no guards; hallways of houses near the tomb allow thickets lavishly growing” 諸侯園寢無官守，丙舍廊廡任草堆。¹⁰⁶ She then

¹⁰⁵ Gu Taiqing, “Gengzi shengri ku xianfuzi,” in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 251.

¹⁰⁶ Gu Taiqing, “Xianfuzi daxiang, shui Zhao, Chu lianger, Shuwen, Yiwen liangnü gongye Nan’gu” 先夫子大祥，率釗初兩兒，叔文以文兩女恭謁南谷，in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, pp. 260–61.

immediately recollects the scenery of the past: on the white walls, there are long poems Yihui personally inscribed and by the stairs, a pair of aronia flowers planted by her. She ends the poem in talking to her late husband about her wish for the future: “The period of time of living in the human world comes to an end and I return to the underworld; someday we can roam around this place together, and that will also be a great joy” 人間限滿歸泉下，他日同遊亦快哉。¹⁰⁷ Clearly, her attitude turns to being more optimistic. Twenty-seven months after Yihui has passed away, Gu Taiqing expresses a similar stance. She still worries as usual about the marriages of her children and the health of her mother-in-law, but Gu concludes the poem with a sense of hope as she talks to her beloved: “Wish that you will secretly give blessings to your descendants; you should not forget the first thing, which is letting the household be full of the scent of brushes and ink” 願君暗裡須加護，第一毋忘翰墨香。¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, she shares some of the responsibilities with her late husband, who has become a protecting spirit. She begs Yihui to bestow his literary talents, which are crucial to their future careers, on their children. Clearly, the well-being and accomplishments of their offspring remain her deepest concern.

In sum, it is clear that poetry serves as a means of spousal communication whether in life or in death. Even though Yihui has passed away, Gu Taiqing still relies on her poetic composition to tell him about her current situation and emotions. Secondly, the harmonious marital relationships of Taiqing and Yihui rest not only on the sweet memories that Gu recalls and records in her poems; also, and obviously, her poems

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

display her uncontrollable tears and resolute willingness to accompany her late husband to the netherworld. Through her series of mourning poems, readers also witness the trace of her recovery from what had once seemed an insurmountably deep grief.

Gu Taiqing's counterpart in this subgenre, Ye Shaoyuan, displays a more traditional stance. While readers can witness Gu's recuperation in her poetic creation over the years, Ye largely follows the tradition in the subgenre of outpouring sadness and yearning. Similarly to Gu, Ye speaks to Shen Yixiu about his struggles through mourning poems written after her death. Additionally, as Martin Huang has noted, Ye Shaoyuan shared an intimate relationship with his late wife and was also at the same time a litany writer, underscoring the hardship Shen had endured in her marital life. Through this emphasis, Ye on the one hand shaped a picture of his late wife as possessing exemplary womanly virtues in a manner worthy of a formal posthumous biography. On the other hand, he implicitly criticizes his mother, who deprived them of private time and keeps Shen from poetic compositions through her use of a parental prerogative. More importantly, with the purpose of "remembering his wife as a more unique individual,"¹⁰⁹ Ye provides further private details about his beloved.¹¹⁰ In addition to the biography and the funeral oration, Ye Shaoyuan wrote over one hundred poems on mourning in the three years after Shen's decease; his descriptions of his current life are scattered throughout his long series of mourning poems. As in his narratives about Shen Yixiu, in his poems of mourning, Ye reiterates his awkwardness about dealing with the poverty-stricken familial finances and accordingly highlights her great virtue of having sold jewelry to support the family. For example, he mentions that "my young son pulls my clothes to ask for pears and chestnuts,

¹⁰⁹ Martin Huang, "Negotiating Wifely Virtues," p. 136.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 109–36.

but when opening the case bequeathed [by Shen], he laments that there is no money” 稚子牽衣問梨栗，遺箱開取嘆無錢。¹¹¹ In another poetic line, he also describes how in that case, piles of pawned clothes were mixed with Shen’s manuscripts of her poems. Also, after having sold all her earrings, he only needs to clean the dust left by bookworms.¹¹²

Not only the family economy but also childcare become burdens placed on Ye’s shoulders without his wife. At the same time, the pain derived from the great loss underscores her capabilities. He states that “our son feels cold without his mother, to whom he could call” 兒寒無母向誰呼. Encountering this problem, Ye needs to seek help from an old servant. Afterwards, the solution is again Shen’s case. He “opens the case bequeathed [by Shen] and checks with tears whether threads and needles have ever existed or not” 開取遺箱和淚看，線針曾否在還無¹¹³. The reaction suggests not only that their impoverished condition forces them to darn old clothes rather than to buy new ones but also the responsibility that he has to assume in part owing to her absence. The poet in addition describes the maid hanging up her portrait, and their seven-year-old son kowtowing to it. He addresses himself to his late wife, saying, “I am just afraid that you are beholding the scene, you will feel the woe of heartbreak everyday” 只恐君看日斷腸。¹¹⁴ The author regards the portrait as the personification of Shen, and finds it poignant

¹¹¹ Ye Shaoyuan, “Zaixu qiyan jueju yibai shou” 再續七言絕句一百首, verse 73, in *Qinzhai yuan* 秦齋怨, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 615.

¹¹² Ye Shaoyuan, “Chuzhong Zhou Yuanfu dao Dong Anren Shaoyu shi yun [the quoted lines omitted] qi wang er pin, ai moshen yan. Gannian siyan, chuanguhuai bujin. Rengyong qianyun, zai geng shizhang” 楚中周元孚悼董安人少玉詩云 [詩略] 妻亡而貧，哀莫甚焉。感念斯言，愴懷不盡。仍用前韻，再賡十章, verse 8, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 605. Hereafter as “Qiwang er pin.”

¹¹³ Ye Shaoyuan, “Zaixu qiyan jueju yibai shou,” verse 29, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 609.

¹¹⁴ Ye Shaoyuan, “Zaixu qiyan jueju yibai shou,” verse 69, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 614.

to see their son worshiping her daily. By talking to Shen Yixiu about the routine practices in their current life, he depicts the household amid sadness. Needless to say, the family members suffering from acute pain also include Ye Shaoyuan himself. He thinks that Shen, when witnessing his anguish, should feel the same way. More importantly, like Gu Taiqing, he considers that, apart from his economic burdens, the major duty on his shoulders is the marriages of their children: “Our sons have not yet wedded and our daughters have not married; Xiang Ping’s two sleeves become damp, and excessive tears moisten the withered hibiscus” 兒尚未婚女未嫁，向平¹¹⁵雙袖濕衰蓉。¹¹⁶ The matrimony of their children is the ultimate goal in the mind of the parent who is still alive.

Poverty also serves as the perfect backdrop to highlight the affection between the couple. Ye mentions more than once that they strove to overcome hardship through cooperation. He indicates that “the family economy is short of resources, and we together save money everyday” 家計蕭條日共攢。¹¹⁷ In another quatrain, he explains that “we are accustomed to having no money but still depend on each other together; you pawn hairpins and I pawn my clothes” 無錢慣亦共相依，君典釵簪我典衣。¹¹⁸ Her contribution to the family as well as her wifely virtues are underscored; the togetherness he speaks of suggests that they were unitary and enjoyed a closeness economically and mentally.

¹¹⁵ Xiang Ping’s biography mentions that after his children got married, Xiang ordered his family members not to bother him with any familial issues. He then indulged himself with traveling to the five famous mountains. In the end, his whereabouts were unknown. See Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu*, pp. 2758–59.

¹¹⁶ Ye Shaoyuan, “Wuyin jiuyue, sanqi chezuo, aidao geng bunengyi yi. zaixu qianyun shizhang, sijin gebi, fu kuchang yu duanyu piaohua yi. shangzai” 戊寅九月，三暮撤座，哀悼更不能已已。再續前韻十章，嗣今閣筆，付枯腸於斷雨飄花矣。傷哉，verse 3, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 632.

¹¹⁷ Ye Shaoyuan, “Zaixu qiyan jueju yibai shou,” verse 31, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 609.

¹¹⁸ Ye Shaoyuan, “Zaixu qiyan jueju yibai shou,” verse 74, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 615.

In addition to supporting his family, and the memories of their rosy past, the poet often recollects literary amusements that they undertook together. For instance, they would “sit opposite each other reading literary works and poetry, and drinking alcohol” 文章詩酒對相看.¹¹⁹ He also reveals a more intimate moment that they shared: “Together held a silk handkerchief for wiping sweat and discussed the poetic lines on it; in front of the lamp, jointly saw ink-painted flowers that were plump” 共把汗羅巾上句，燈前同看墨花肥。¹²⁰ Not only were they in close physical proximity in looking at the painting, but also by means of the handkerchief mentioned in some of the poems, which is a suggestive love token, Ye clearly indicates their spousal affection and intimacy. Their physical closeness is also implied through those words related to the body, namely “sweat” and “plumpness,” which suggest a private view and an intimate touch. Based on this, after he has lost his partner, the utensils used to engage in those literary activities inevitably become testimonies to their misery. Simultaneously, the broken zither and the dried ink stone serve as metaphors of the condition of the poet himself.¹²¹

In his poems of mourning, Ye’s remembrance also touches upon their sensuous experiences. On a moonlit night, he looks at the locked room where they used to live, looking for a long time until the moonlight shifts. The scene further evokes his yearning and sadness: “Even more is the place of yearning hard to see; you wore evening makeup while sitting under the window, we had tender times in the past” 更是相思難見處，晚妝櫳下舊溫存。¹²² Though his envisioning of her, readers can project their gaze onto his

¹¹⁹ Ye Shaoyuan, “Zaixu qiyuan jueju yibai shou,” verse 31, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 609.

¹²⁰ Ye Shaoyuan, “Zaixu qiyuan jueju yibai shou,” verse 93, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 617.

¹²¹ Ye Shaoyuan, “Neiren zaiqi reng ci qianyun” 內人再暮仍次前韻, verse 8, pp. 630–31.

¹²² Ye Shaoyuan, “Zaixu qiyuan jueju yibai shou,” verse 40, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 610. Thanks to the indication of Professor Rania Huntington, these two lines echo Su Shi’s celebrated *ci*, “Jiangchengzi” 江城

wife and witness their spousal intimacy and their sweet memories. In another mourning quatrain, Ye alludes to a renowned story of an intimate relationship between a man and a woman, but reverses it into an expression of his grief and loyalty. The verse reads:

合歡被冷漫驚猜，冰織衾稜鐵共裁

Joint pleasure quilt¹²³ becomes cold, and I vainly grow frightened and suspicious.

Ice seems to be woven into the coverlet and to form sharp edges. Both icy and iron-like feeling cuts my body.

一夜秋江雲雨斷，從教不上楚王臺

In one night, cloud and rain above the autumn river are severed. Henceforth it makes me never ascend the terrace of the king of Chu.¹²⁴

Right at the beginning, the poet starts with a strongly suggestive object, the comforter with paired patterns, to connote marital harmony and even sexual pleasure. However, the joy is suddenly interrupted by coldness. Additionally, his fears and doubts form a sharp contrast with delight in the past. Obviously, the frostiness stems not only from the weather but also his loneliness, which makes the quilt seem to him hard and cold as iron. At the same time, this may also imply that owing to the absence of his wife, there is no one to make the bed. In the poem's latter half, the author turns to an allusion about an affair between a female immortal and the King of Chu. After the consummation of this affair, the immortal vows that she will wait below the Sun Terrace.¹²⁵ Due to this allusion, "clouds and rain" become metaphors of sexual consummation. Thus, in this

子, mourning his late wife. Su wrote that he did not intentionally think of her, but naturally, she was unforgettable. One night, he suddenly dreamt of returning to the hometown. When he looked through the window, his wife was putting on makeup. See Su Shi, *Su Shi ci biannian jiaozhu* 蘇軾詞編年校注, annots. Zou Tongqing 鄒同慶 and Wang Zongtang 王宗堂 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), pp. 141–42.

¹²³ This is a kind of comforter with patterns that are in pairs such as mandarin ducks to connote adornment and romantic love between a couple.

¹²⁴ Ye Shaoyuan, "Zaixu qiyan jueju yibai shou," verse 85, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 616.

¹²⁵ The original line is "Mourning I am Down Cloud, Evening I am Pouring Rain. Dawn after dawn, dusk and after dusk, Below the Sun Terrace" 旦為朝雲，暮為行雨。朝朝暮暮，陽臺之下. The translation is from David Knechtges, "Rhapsody of Gaotang Shrine," in *Wen Xuan or Selection of Refined Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), vol. 3, pp. 325–26.

context, the term indicates for Ye their sexual as well as spousal relationship.

Furthermore, the ephemeral quality of clouds and rain along with “one night” highlights the suddenness of the break-off. Meanwhile, through the allusion, Ye implicitly reiterates Shen’s immortal identity and suggests that her death means her return to heaven.¹²⁶ The poet concludes the verse with this allusion to pledge that he will remain loyal and a widower thereafter.¹²⁷

Another conspicuous theme of mourning poetry composed by a member of an educated couple to a late partner is expecting a future reunion in the hereafter. Ye Shaoyuan states his wish to marry Shen: “In this year we can tie the kindred brocade once more” 何年再綰同心帶. The following line, “The words were spoken out, but now only ten thousand bushels of sorrow are left” 話出而今萬斛愁¹²⁸, adds another layer to the otherwise plain wish. It denotes a sweet oath between the couple and a wish that is now unlikely to be realized. Similarly, he sighs about not knowing when they can meet again.¹²⁹ Like Gu Taiqing, Ye tries to imagine the afterlife in order to comfort himself: “When I think of the place where we will reunite in the next life, this may be barely enough to expel my depression and raise my eyebrows” 想到來生重見處, 或堪舒悶兩眉浮.¹³⁰ In addition, he found consolation in Buddhist notions favoring a life of reclusion

¹²⁶ In other verses, Ye Shaoyuan indicates his wife as a banished immortal to the human world more than one time.

¹²⁷ Months later, Ye in another mourning poem reiterates his unwillingness of remarry through the allusion to the dragon maiden. In the Tang tale of the dragon maiden, the male protagonist, Liu Yi 柳毅, helps the maiden, who was suffering from domestic violence, deliver her letter to her parents. Afterwards, Liu marries the maiden as his third wife after the previous two have passed away. Ye state that he is uninterested in doing the same thing. He indicates remarrying in his self-annotation. See Ye Sgaoyuan, “Bingzi mengchun zai dao neiren” 丙子孟春再悼內人, verse 4, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 621.

¹²⁸ Ye Shaoyuan, “Zaixu qiyan jueju yibai shou,” verse 67, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 614.

¹²⁹ Ye Shaoyuan, “Zaixu qiyan jueju yibai shou,” verse 44, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 611.

¹³⁰ Ye Shaoyuan, “Qiwang er pin,” verse 10, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 605.

or considering life and death as essentially the same. Even so, Ye largely immersed himself in remorse.

Conclusion

Facing the long tradition of poems on the motifs of yearning and separation, poetic exchanges between companionate couples demonstrate various dimensions other than the conventional monotonous expressions of sorrow and depression. Women writers still largely follow the tradition in using conventional images to voice their melancholy during separation from their husbands. However, in addition to sadness, they reveal other sentiments such as discontent, humor, and consideration. Furthermore, the image of a virtuous wife and the identity of poet are intentionally emphasized. They highlight their identity as literati in terms ranging from composition ability to deep devotion to poetry. More importantly, both husbands and wives join in the formation of the image. In the observations and descriptions of the male literati, we find that they consider their partners to be their perfect companions and the ones to whom they can entrust the household when they are away. The husbands' works promote the idea of a literate moral wife as their ideal helpmate. Also, the poets of both genders transform the tradition. Women poets not only appropriate allusions to express their sentiments but also impersonate male scholars. In certain situations, such as banishment, male literati would adopt the voices of yearning women. To some degree, this fits Kang-i Sun Chang's argument that Ming and Qing literati, including both men and women, created "a kind of cultural androgyny." Women authors endeavor to emulate a masculine poetic style, while the male literati are

fond of women's culture and their marginal position makes them identify with women.¹³¹ Interestingly, even in conversing with their wives, they still speak in a relative feminine tone; in certain contexts, the literary expressions of husband and wife are reversed from the stereotypes of the ideal gender system.

Needless to say, separation is a legitimate occasion for companionate couples to overtly demonstrate their affection. Besides sorrow, which is prevalent throughout the long tradition, their affection is displayed in depictions of intimacy, and the mental comforting, advice-giving, and understanding of spouses. When they recall sweet memories, their sensual experiences are of significance. Although both men and women writers mention their remembrance of spousal intimacy in their works, the women often hint through allusions to abiding gender norms. Additionally, providing comfort to a depressed beloved in the poetic exchanges was not unidirectional but mutual, as male poets do consider emotions of their wives. As a companionate couple, their spouses are their poetic friends and the one understands their thinking, works, as well as preference.

Gender difference is clearly displayed in sensuous themes. Restrained by gender restrictions, gentry women would shun overt mention of spousal intimacy, especially sensual experiences. However, for male writers, sensuousness forms the warmest and sweetest memories in their marriage; they have more freedom to talk about it by means of allusions and suggestions.

The intimate spousal relationship is not isolated but should be situated within the context of an extended family. In the accepted hierarchy, marital relationships are inferior

¹³¹ Kang-i Sun Chang, "Ming-Qing Women Poets and Cultural Androgyny," pp. 11–25.

to other types of connections, especially that between parents and children. To present themselves as virtuous wives, women poets would yield to parents-in-law and keep their appreciation of spousal intimacy in the inner chamber. Further, this group of poems unveils the dominance parents-in-law would assert over daughter-in-law. The absence of men may strengthen the bond between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, since the daughter-in-law needs to sacrifice private time to accompany her mother-in-law when her father-in-law is away.

The poetry of mourning is a subgenre of that of remembrance, which presents affection and simultaneously makes a sharp contrast to current sorrows. In the tradition of the subgenre, bequeathed objects serve as love tokens and therefore triggers of recollection as well as sorrowful sentiments. Additionally, both male and female authors extol women's virtues by emphasizing women's capability to support the familial finances and help raise the children. The more difficult the situation, the more conspicuously the wifely and motherly virtues that are shown. More importantly, descendants are always the ultimate concern in a parent's mind after the death of a spouse. Among the responsibilities they ought to assume, the arrangement of the marriages of children is of the most utmost importance to both parents. In addition to this, to gentry women, the education of their offspring, which benefits the future careers of the children and thus the honor of their mothers, carries heavy weight in their widowhood, while taking care of children's daily life takes up a good portion of male literati's worries.

Chapter 2: Civil Service Exam

Introduction

This chapter discusses poems about the civil service exams, which were not only an important regular event for the court, but also on a personal level took up a large proportion of the energy and attention in the life of cultural elites and marked the culmination of their long process of education. Also, as they provided the principal means for the ruling house to select outstanding young people of talent, the civil service examinations provided in imperial China the principal opening for ambitious intellectuals to achieve professional success and power as part of the imperial bureaucracy and maintained the status of families. The system was not uncomplicated, the exams including approximately four levels. Scholars (*tongsheng* 童生, who might be, but were not always, children) needed to take a test to become licentiates (*shengyuan* 生員, or *xiucai* 秀才); this qualified one to sit at the next stage, the provincial exam (*xiangshi* 鄉試). This was held in the autumn every three years with *dizhi* 地支 of *zi* 子, *mao* 卯, *wu* 午, and *you* 酉 and the status after passing would be *juren* 舉人. *Juren* were qualified to take the metropolitan exam (*huishi* 會試), which was also held triennially in spring in the *chou* 丑, *chen* 辰, *wei* 未, and *xu* 戌 years. Those who succeeded on the metropolitan exam were given the *gongshi* 貢士 degree; they would attend the palace exam (*dianshi* 殿試), leading to the *jinshi* 進士 degree. There was also a test called the “court review” (*chaoke* 朝科) that was given three days after the palace exam to evaluate the second and third-class *jinshi* holders. Candidates who ranked in the first class on this

exam would be appointed Bachelors at the Hanlin Academy.

According to research by historians on the correlation between demography and the civil service examination, the population growth during late imperial period resulted in even more severe competition in the exams, especially in the densely-populated lower Yangzi delta. Also, its prosperous monetary economy created more resources that could be invested in children's education than in other places, and so this area wound up attracting most *jinsshi* holders.¹ Additionally, due to the high competition, and the triennial instead of annual scheduling, the course of exam-taking started quite early in a male literati's life. The efforts of candidates took several years, and many never passed the last stage. Consequently, for many the early years of marital life largely overlapped with the period of taking exams and preparing for them. For example, Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan were married at fourteen (in 1776) and four years later, Sun failed a civil service exam (perhaps at the provincial level). It was at this time that the topic of exams began to appear in his poems. According to writings that are included in his collected works, Sun spent at least 25 years on the exam, a period that took up half the length of his marriage. Taking the exam was not only time-consuming but also often brought about the physical separation of literary couples. Provincial-level civil service exams were held in the city capital of each province, while the metropolitan and palace exams both took place in the Capital, which was Beijing in both the Ming and Qing dynasties. Because of this, elite men had to leave home for the capital to sit for the exam and were forced into absence from their household for a long time, and sometimes more than once. This separation was discussed in the previous chapter, while the present chapter will focus on

¹ For further details, see Shang Yanliu 商衍鑿, *Qingdai keju kaoshi shulue* 清代科舉考試述略 (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1975), pp. 153–69.

poems that directly mention the civil service exams.

I will focus here on three renowned literary couples—Xu Can and Chen Zhilin, Xi Peilan and Sun Yuanxiang, and Shen Yixiu and Ye Shaoyuan. The three husbands all took the exam several times and eventually attained the degree.² As royal family members, Yihui and Gu Taiqing were spared taking the exam.

Since Ye Shaoyuan kept autobiographical records in his diary as well as *nianpu* 年譜, we know the trajectory of his participation in the civil service exam. Ye first took the provincial exam when he was fifteen. After eight years of preparation, he succeeded on the second try at the provincial-level test. Around six months after, he traveled to Nanjing to take the metropolitan exam, which he failed the first time. He was 33 when he finally obtained the *juren* degree. Then he moved relatively quickly from *juren* to *jinshi*. Finally, in 1625, at the age of 37, he took and passed the highest-level exam.³ During her husband's almost fifteen years of exam-taking, Shen Yixiu also participated in the later thirteen years. It is easy to understand why Shen would voice her complaint about his subsequent failure.

According to Chen Zhilin's own poems, before getting his *jinshi* 進士 degree in 1637, he participated in the exam at least three times. After entering the bureaucratic system, his political career did not go smoothly at all. During the Ming-Qing dynastic transition, he was implicated in his father's conviction for having failed to fight the Qing troops, and Zhilin lost his position at the end. Later, he entered the Qing court. He was eventually promoted to *daxueshi* 大學士 (Grand Secretary), with the additional title of

² Chen Zhilin, "Preface to *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*," in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*, p. 576.

³ Ye Shaoyuan, *Wumengtang ji*, pp. 826, 829, 833, 836.

Grand Guardian of the Heir Apparent. However, his engagement in factional struggles resulted in his being exiled twice; the second time, he was unable to return alive.⁴ In real life, Xu Can complied with Confucian norms by accompanying Chen Zhilin to Shengjing 盛京, the place of his second exile, and transported his coffin home.⁵ Nonetheless, in the poetic field, Xu would express her own, different, opinions about Chen's political choices. Partly because of this, their poetic communications constituted an interesting dialogue.⁶

Like Chen and Xu, Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan were also from cultured backgrounds. It took Sun ten years from the first time he sat for the civil service exam until he formally passed it. During this time, he flunked at least twice and his father expressed strong disappointment about his lack of success.⁷ Facing Sun's constant failure, Xi Peilan never showed negative emotion in her works. When Sun Yuanxiang tried and failed the very first time, Xi was alone taking care of their ailing child, who was on the verge of death, but she wrote a long and encouraging poem to cheer up her beloved husband.⁸ It is easy to imagine their rapture when Sun finally passed the examination in 1805. Xi composed two poems to congratulate him, and Sun penned several reporting to his wife on his situation in the capital. However, before being officially appointed, Sun returned to his hometown due to his illness. He made his living by lecturing in private academies, and never accepted an official position again.

⁴ Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽 et al., *Qingshi gao*, pp. 9635–36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14050.

⁶ Li Xiaorong, "Singing in Dis/Harmony in Times of Chaos," pp. 215–54.

⁷ Sun Yuanxiang, "Preface" to *Tianzhenge ji*, p. 1.

⁸ David Hawkes, "His P'ei-Lan," p. 117.

Failure

To both male literati and their cultured wives, whether the occasion was passing or failing, the topics in poems about exam were all poetic themes considered worth writing about on their own account. In the extant collections, we find both poems deploring failure and congratulating success. The next section of this chapter will center on the former, exploring how they use writing to adjust their state of mind when facing frustrations, and thus as a kind of therapy.

In poems on the failure of the civil service examinations, the most important task seems to be to search for reasons to rationalize the failure as a form of consolation. Considered in this light, the poems of the two male writers, as failed examinees, Chen and Sun, reflect an inevitably depressing tone. They resorted to writing as a therapy to assuage the feeling of loss, although they justified the decisions of the court, by acknowledging that they were not good enough. Meanwhile, they consoled themselves with alternative future plans that they would be unable to realize if they passed, such as traveling, accompanying their parents, and even pursuing the ways of cultivating to become an immortal, on the other. In other words, the male authors, at least on the surface, accepted the results with complaisance and endeavored to adjust their emotions so as to go on.

Compared to their husbands, as comfort providers or their intimate friends, poetesses manifested more steadfast attitudes.⁹ Unfortunately, there is no existing poetic work by Xu Can that belongs to this type. Xi Peilan compared her husband to the famous poets Li Bo and Du Fu 杜甫 (712–70), who did not pass the exam either, in order to

⁹ Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 112–14.

firmly convince him that he should not harbor any doubts about his own talents owing to the unsatisfactory outcome.¹⁰ In light of this, she was more candid in indicating her disagreement with the result. Apart from playing the role of an intimate friend, in another poem written to encourage her husband, Xi Peilan returns to the traditional image in poems by women writers addressing their husbands as a considerate caretaker concerned about his health and familial responsibility.¹¹

Chen Zhilin wrote his first surviving poem upon failing the civil service examination in 1628, when the Chongzhen 崇禎 emperor assumed the throne. He begins the poem with a sharp comparison between the sovereign and himself. The line says “The day that the intelligent ruler flew like a dragon¹² is the year in which the foolish student¹³ hid like an inchworm” 聖主龍飛日，愚生蠖伏年。¹⁴¹⁵ This particular timing enabled the poet to exaggerate the difference between the soaring dragon, long the symbol of emperors, and a hidden worm on the ground. In addition, even though “yusheng” 愚生 (foolish student) is a common first-person pronoun, in this context, this term also refers to his self-debasement. It is because of his own foolishness that he flunked the exam; his failure has nothing to do with unfairness on the part of the examiners or flaws in the system. Accordingly, in the succeeding couplet, he states that there are many worthy men among the *jinshi* degree receivers who have obtained positions. Beneath these words explaining the situation to himself to justify it, we can see an effort to mitigate his own

¹⁰ Xi Peilan, “Fuzi baoba gui shi yi weizhi” 夫子報罷歸詩以慰之, *Changzhen’ge ji*, p. 620. Translation modified from Irving Yucheng Lo’s translation in Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, eds., *Woman Writers of Traditional China*, pp. 480–81.

¹¹ Xi Peilan, “Bingwu baoba wei fuzi” 丙午報罷慰夫子, *Changzhen’ge ji*, p. 625.

¹² An allusion that indicates the rise or accession of an emperor.

¹³ A modest way to address a male speaker. Here it refers to the poet himself.

¹⁴ A simile to represent a person encountering frustration and therefore unable to realize his ambitions.

¹⁵ Chen Zhilin, “Wuchen xiadi zuo” 戊辰下第作, in *Fuyun ji*, p. 76.

loss and pain. In the third couplet Chen Zhilin turns to describe scenery on his way home: “The colors of the Tai Mount urge my wandering shoes to stay; the sprays of the Yangzi River draw on the sailing boat” 岱色留遊屐，江花引放船。¹⁶ This line can be read not only as an actual depiction of what the poet beheld on the road but also as an attempt to soothe his dispirited heart. On the one hand, structurally speaking, this line lessens the underlying depressing mood in the first two couplets; on the other hand, Chen uses the terms “you” 遊 (wandering, touring) and “fang” 放 (sailing, unbridled) to connote the situation as an idle man who has the freedom to journey around. Probably on account of the leisure time he possessed as well as the pleasure he took in nature, his mood cheered up at the end. In the last two lines, he resumes his expression of pride in saying that this return is not miserable at all and that he does not accept commiseration from worldly people. Whether Chen Zhilin truly felt better, or this was a mere gesture and pretense, we can see that both writing and travel served him as remedies for his failure.

Three years later, Chen Zhilin attended and failed the exam again.¹⁷ He applies the same writing techniques in this poem as before. First, he talks about his past experiences as an examinee. Then he offers an explanation of his failure in terms of his personal incompatibility with the established rules, and he does this even while paradoxically justifying the official decision. He concludes the poem with mention of his future plans and familial obligations. He laments not being able to attend the banquet for those who had newly obtained the *jinshi* degree but is pleased that he could serve his parents during the three-year interval.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Chen Zhilin, “Xinwei xiadi zuo” 辛未下第作, in *Fuyunji*, pp. 76–77.

In these two poems, Chen Zhilin endeavors to calm himself; nonetheless, when he fails the exam the third time, he is more crestfallen. In the first couplet, he says that he does not care about the ordinary ups and downs of life but worries about wasting the springtime of his life. As usual, in the succeeding couplet, Chen rationalizes and defends the authoritative judgment. Yet, he is less convincing this time, saying only, “Although during a difficult time the ruler places more emphasis on military merit, the emperor’s mind advocates for Confucian scholars” 時艱雖右武，上意本崇儒。¹⁸ A more depressed mode pervades the fifth and sixth lines, which also provide the reasons for his flunking: He wanted to sob but soon realized that as scholar he is not exceptional; He did not dare to regard himself as a pearl because of frequent abandonment he experienced. The ending couplet, which often suggests prospects to encourage the author himself, on the contrary, plunges into negative emotion as he compares himself with his friends. However, the poet still strives to cheer himself up. Chen intertwines his destiny with that of his friends in order to console himself, although he is not as good as his friends, whom he compares to jade and pearl. However, even when entering the bureaucracy, they too were unable to realize their ambitions. Echoing the third line, the ending deplures not only his own misfortune but also that of literati in general.

Like Chen Zhilin, Sun Yuanxiang also failed the exam multiple times. In 1785, Sun proceeded from his hometown of Changshu to attend the provincial-level exam held in Nanjing. He composed a poem recording his reluctance to leave due to his mother’s illness. Yet, the night before his departure, she enjoins him to invest all of his energy on the exam and not worry about her illness, which may be cured if succeeds in the exam

¹⁸ Chen Zhilin, “Jiashu xiadi zuo” 甲戌下第作, in *Fuyunji*, pp. 78–79.

house. Sun concludes the verse with an expression of his strong, conflicting emotions, saying, “In front of mother’s bed, I forced myself to chat and laugh; When I stepped out of the door, my tears totally soaked my handkerchief” 床前強言笑，出門涕霑巾。¹⁹ In this verse, the poet vividly portrayed his dilemma of being divided between career and family. He also exemplifies the importance the examination could have within a gentry household, with its influence being powerfully exerted on every family member.

Unfortunately, according to one of the farewell prefaces he sent to his brother-in-law, he would fail again for a fourth time.²⁰

Although succeeding in obtaining his *juren* 舉人 qualification, Sun still needed to face another cycle of torture in the highest-level examination. Years later, when he left Beijing because of another exam failure, he penned a poem to express his thoughts.²¹ Unlike Chen Zhilin, he did not entirely support the court’s decision but indicated that the result showed the examiner’s capricious mind. In the following couplet, he turns to his poverty; he states that he needs to write a letter begging for rice while in the sun and ridicules his craving for wealth. This to a certain degree shows the reality of the literary examinees’ lives, as they struggled with low incomes due to long-term unemployment. However, as with Chen Zhilin, his poem ends with his future plan to be a temporary farmer, and then provides an explanation to assuage himself that he possesses immortal “bones” and in fact belongs to the celestial world. In other words, Sun justifies his failure by saying his talents place him beyond being restrained by the mundane exam rules.

Another time, Sun Yuanxiang failed the exam but did not directly write a poem

¹⁹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Fu Jinling zuo” 赴金陵作, in *Tianzhenge ji*, p. 44.

²⁰ Sun Yuanxiang, “Song Zhang Zihe xu” 送張子和序, in *Tianzhenge ji*, p. 476.

²¹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Chudu kaozhan” 出都口占, in *Tianzhenge ji*, p. 109.

about it. Instead, he composed a series of playful verses as a gift to an actor whose stage name was Huo Xiaoyu 霍小玉, which derives from a fictional female character in a Tang tale.²² In the first poem, Sun draws a parallel between the fate of examinees and actors. The poem says:

下第後戲贈霍郎小玉 “After Failing the Civil Service Exam, I Playfully
Composed this Poem and Gave it to the Boy Actor Huo Xiaoyu”
尹邢終究孰娉婷，評點妍媸帶淚聽。
Yin and Xing,²³ who was more beautiful after all;
Hearing the evaluations and comments on beauty and ugliness with tears.
同受人間顛倒殺，下場舉子上場伶。
Similarly endured a deadly reversal in the human world:
Examinees attending the civil service exam and actors stepping on the stage.²⁴

In this poem, Sun uses an allusion to suggest that he possesses in fact the same abilities as others but can only accept the results of the evaluation of his essays passively and with sorrow. From this perspective, there is no difference between actors who change their gender and scholars taking the exam who have to accept unfair assessments: they are both controlled by external forces. Facing this failure, Sun feels not only dispirited but also the arbitrariness of the officials in charge of the selection. Additionally, the poet uses the

²² The story discusses a young scholar Li Yi 李益 who fell in love with the demi-mondaine Huo Xiaoyu when he passed the civil service exam, and was waiting for the specialized exam on legal document writing held by the Ministry of Personnel. Li passed the exam and was appointed to a secretarial position in Zheng County 鄭縣 (located in the present Shaanxi 陝西 Province). On the verge of his departure, Li promised Huo that he would marry her after he settled down there. However, Li changed his mind once he got home, and obeyed his mother's order to marry a girl from a renowned family for higher social status. Afterwards, an errant knight in a yellow robe out of righteous indignation kidnapped Li Yi, brought him to Huo Xiaoyu's place, and made him apologize to Xiaoyu. On learning the truth, she passed away from grief. After her death, Huo Xiaoyu transformed herself into an evil ghost to harass Li Yi and his wife, which drove Li to become suspicious to women. In the end, Li divorced what then were his four wives. See Jinag Fang 蔣防 (792–835), “Huo Xiaoyu zhuan” 霍小玉傳, in *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, comp. and ed. Li Fang 李昉 (925–96) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), pp. 4006–11.

²³ Yin and Xing here refer to two ladies who were imperial consorts of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty. Since both were favored by the emperor, he ordered them to avoid each other. Here Sun may be indicating two people with similar capabilities and qualities. See Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–86 B.C.E.), *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), pp. 1983–84.

²⁴ Sun Yuanxiang, “Xiadi hou xizeng Huolang Xiaoyu,” in *Tianzhenge ji*, p. 166.

same word, “chang” 場, for both examinee and actor, to indicate their similarly controlled fate; the words “xia” 下 (attend; downward) and “shang” 上 (step on; onward) echo “diandao” 顛倒 (reverse) in the previous line. Moreover, he chooses a word that is strong in both sound and connotation to highlight the sense of torture at the unfair treatment they had to endure. The word “sha” 殺 conveys not only a sharp piercing feeling via the fourth-tone pronunciation, but also the extreme intensity of the destruction of their talents through what is metaphorized as murder by strangulation, using also the intensifier “indeed.”

In the following verse, the poet continually uses the same comparison to indicate his non-appreciation. He says that the actor’s voice is so high that it is able to stop clouds and linger around the beams on the roof. Yet, the only audience is swallows and sparrows. When the actor finishes the most famous aria, which starts with “Biyuntian” 碧雲天 (To the tune: “A Sky Azure and Clouded”) in *Xixiangji* 西廂記 (*The Story of the Western Wing*), the poet concludes from the futile effort that people in the north dislike the play. The hidden message is clear; although he has great talent, he still is not able to satisfy the examiners.

In the fourth poem in the set, Sun’s ambiguous use of *lang* 郎 (lad) enables a fluid interpretation. The *lang* could denote the actor Huo Xiaoyu, as well as the author himself. Sun mentions in the title that these poems were a playful present for the young Huo Xiaoyu. For the latter, Sun wrote “exhorting the lad to take advantage of the high tide of the great river to return” 勸郎歸趁大江潮. Due to the scarcity of information about the actor, we cannot ascertain whether this refers to him or not. Yet, it is clear that the person who in the poem would return to his hometown through the waterway is Sun Yuanxiang.

The succeeding two lines are also open to interpretation. They read, “How can you painstakingly love the guest in the yellow robe, but look haughtily at Shacha²⁵ every day” 如何苦戀黃衫客，日看沙咤氣色驕？ Here, the subject again is ambiguous. On the one hand, the two lines may allude to Huo’s situation, as he feels captivated by someone whom he dislikes. On the other hand, they may suggest the poet’s situation. The guest in the yellow robe denotes the emperor; Shachali signifies the local governor; in the Qing dynasty, scholars who did not have official positions would serve as secretaries in local governments. This couplet could be read as a struggle between ideal and reality. He dreams of being appreciated by the emperor but in reality, must defer to arrogant local magistrates.

To conclude this set of poems, Sun returns to the topic of appreciation. He states that his fondness for Huo is the same as his fondness for people with talent, but Huo Xiaoyu may not know how deep his affection is. He finishes the poem with an expression of sadness and regret: “In the clear night, I suddenly dropped two lines of tears; in my life I also disappointed the one who truly understood my tunes” 清夜忽然雙淚落，平生我亦負知音。²⁶ The term “*zhiyin*” 知音 (intimate friends) here suggests that Huo Xiaoyu (the fictive character) is a *zhiyin* betrayed by Li Yi, while to the author himself, *zhiyin* refers to his cultured wife Xi Peilan. Moreover, we can interpret the *fu* 負 in two ways. In the context of the examination, he was not able to fulfill Xi Peilan’s expectation; but if we understand this term in the context of the husband and wife relationship, perhaps Sun

²⁵ Shacha is a shortened form of Shachali 沙咤利, who was a foreign general in the Tang tale, “Liuzhi zhuan” 柳氏傳. He forcefully snatched the heroine from Han Hong 韓翃 during the An Lushan rebellion. Later, Shachali became a term used to indicate a powerful person who snatches others’ wives. See Xu Yaozuo 許堯佐 (?), “Liushi zhuan,” in Li Fang comp., and ed., *Taiping guangji*, pp. 3995–97.

²⁶ Sun Yuanxiang, “Xiadi hou xizeng Huolang Xiaoyu,” in *Tianzhenge ji*, p. 166

is also confessing that like Li Yi he betrayed his wife because he was enthralled by a male actor.

The idea of Xi Peilan as Sun Yuanxiang's strongest *zhiyin* is much clearer when we read her poem responding to his failure.²⁷ She eloquently begins the poem by taking Li Bo and Du Fu, the two greatest poets in Chinese literary history, as examples to establish her argument that even though they were gifted, they were not able to achieve anything on the exam. Subsequently, indicating that Sun's poetic style was learned from these two precedents, she compares his talent with that of these two. Xi even suggests that Du Fu's soul is in Sun's wrist, and that some of Sun's poems may be able to fully revive the spirit of Li Bo. Given this, even though he flunked the exam, she could envision the beautiful scenery of the northern part of China in the different seasons as described in his poems that were written during the journey. Then, she reaches a powerful conclusion. Sun's talents are so great that examiners in the human world did not dare to approve his candidacy because they preferred instead to yield to Li and Du as his true teachers. This comment not only nicely transforms Sun's failure to a compliment, but also conceals her criticism that the examiners cannot select the most capable people for the country. In addition, due to a systematic shift, in the Qing dynasty, poetry ceased to be the subject of the examinations. In Xi's opinion, this was the cause of her husband's neglect. It is hard to say whether she meant to judge this shift as good or bad; yet, this particular occasion at the very least allowed her to express her understanding of what was a purely masculine world.

Besides the affirmation of his talents, Xi encouraged her husband to continue

²⁷ Xi Peilan, "Fuzi baoba gui shi yi weizhi," *Changzhen 'ge ji*.

composing poetry and pursuing his learning. She adamantly believed that Sun Yuanxiang was worthy of his name being transmitted to later generations, based on his talent alone. In the succeeding couplet, the poetess shifted to the moral significance of this incident. She exhorted her husband, “Although the person in the inner chamber (that is, Xi Peilan herself) does not possess brilliant insight, I quite know that begging for pity is shameful” 閨中雖無卓識存，頗知乞憐為可恥。²⁸ Compared with the earlier eloquence, this displays an interesting irony. Xi Peilan distances herself from the public sphere, meaning in this case the civil service exam and related politics, and degrades herself in becoming a person who lives in a secluded place without knowledge. Notwithstanding her unassuming statement, her remarks on her husband’s poetic style fully manifest her acquaintance with, and outstanding taste, in poetry. She points out that fame and merit, which disappear along with one’s life, would impede true learning. The distinction between learning/poetry and fame/accomplishment seems to set the eight-legged essays apart from a genuine knowledge. In the end, Xi Peilan uses the same sentence pattern from the very first line, beginning with “do you not see?” to encourage Sun Yuanxiang not to worry about poverty since it is the birthplace of worthiness.

In 1786, when Sun Yuanxiang failed the provincial-level exam, he had experienced this failure three times. Xi Peilan penned a comforting poem for the fourth disappointment, with a calmer and more tender tone compared to the previous one. It says:

丙午報罷慰夫子 “My Husband Failed the Civil Service Exam in the Bingwu year. I Wrote this Poem to Console Him”
戚戚誠何勉，難堪久病身。
You are despondent; how could I truly encourage you?

²⁸ Xi Peilan, “Fuzi baobagui shi yi weizhi,” in *Changzhen’ge ji*, p. 620.

It is unbearable for a body with chronic illness.
 文章原有厄，貧賤豈無人？
 Literary works originally have adversities;
 How could it be no one is poor and humble?
 劍氣終騰上，詩才況絕倫。
 The radiance of a sword²⁹ will eventually soar upward;
 Your poetic talents, moreover, are extremely unprecedented.
 加餐須努力，尚有白頭親。
 You should endeavor to add more meals,³⁰
 You still have hoary-headed parents.³¹

As in the previously discussed poem, the author retains her strong belief in Sun's literary talents. More importantly, besides the role of his *zhiyin*, her more conspicuous image in this poem is that of a virtuous and considerate wife. From the beginning, she cares about his feeling of dejection as well as his ailment. She reveals her difficulty in coming up with consoling words owing to his recurring failure. Her next thought in the poem is his health after a difficult fight trying to succeed on the exam and the setback of his failure. In accordance with contemporary notions of the close relation between literary talent and ill fate,³² she links his illness and frustration with his high capabilities and goes on to speak of his prospects, in light of them, for a bright future. By expressing concern for Sun's health and reminding him of his responsibility to his family, the author shows herself a considerate and virtuous wife who talks about family issues and filial piety.

Not everyone faced with frustrating results on the exam reacted so positively. Recurrent failure in the civil service exam not only undermined the confidence of many male literati but also could evoke resentment from their gentry wives. In 1624, Shen

²⁹ This term is used to signify a person's talents.

³⁰ This expression means to take care of one's health.

³¹ Xi Peilan, "Bingwu baoba wei fuzi," in *Changzhen'ge ji*, p. 625.

³² Binbin Yang, "The Aesthetics of Illness in Late Imperial China," in "Women and the Aesthetics of Illness: Poetry on Illness by Qing-Dynasty Women Poets," Ph. D diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 2007), pp. 12–42.

Yixiu writes a quatrain titled, “In the Jiazi Year, Zhongshao Takes the Fall Term Civil Service Exam at Jinling” 甲子仲韶秋試金陵, bidding farewell to her husband as he goes to take the test, and at the same time offering rather strict encouragements. The poem reads:

桃葉秦淮幾度秋，離魂長自繫孤舟
 How many autumns you have spent at the port named peach leaf located at
 Qinhuai river;
 My departing soul has been tied to the lonely boat for a long time.
 而今莫再辜秋色，休使還教妾面羞
 Now you should not betray the scenery of autumn;
 do not again let your humble wife’s face be full of shame.³³

In this verse, Shen makes a comparison between the changing time and the stillness of her long wait, which indicates a common condition of gentry wives during the exam periods. In addition, the port was a well-known spot famous as site of the flourishing courtesan business in Nanjing. From this perspective, Shen is making a parallel between the jolly atmosphere in the Qinhuai area and her deep yearning that involves a sense of the soul as detaching itself from the body through terrible loneliness and worry. In the poem’s latter half, the poetess shifts her focus to exhortation and discontent. Through a severe attitude, she conveys her concern and hope for her husband’s success, but also candidly reveals the pressure she feels and the tight bond between her husband’s possible achievement and her own hopes of fame.

Since the civil service exam was almost the sole way for literati to attain a job and make a living, it was the principal goal not only for elite men but also their female relatives including mothers and wives. Due to their different personalities, when facing

³³ Shen Yixiu, “Jiazi Zhongshao qiushi Jinling,” in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 107.

unsatisfactory results on the exam, the two male poets here express different attitudes. With greater hope for a political career, Chen Zhilin was more accepting of the final decision; he tried to assuage himself with recognition of his unsuitability for following established rules and cheered himself up through writing, traveling, and leisurely enjoyments. Only on failing on the third attempt did he reveal his sorrow, endeavoring to reassure himself with the thought that literati in general all face an uncertain fate in a chaotic time. Similarly, Sun Yuanxiang also rationalized his failure as a result partly of his incompatibility with the mundane world on account of what he considered his immortal qualities. However, Sun's basic attitude toward the "unexpected" outcome of the exam was more passive; he stated more than once that the result was determined by the examiners rather than his own performance. He seemed to be more willing to spend his time on his family and other things, but he was inevitably pushed onto what was the only path to official positions.

For women poets, poetic communication enabled them to both construct a self-image as a virtuous wife and acknowledge the unfairness of the exam. Xi Peilan is a typical example, who believed resolutely in her husband's talent. By saying that the examiners dare not accept Sun Yuanxiang, she probably meant to insinuate that their tastes were inferior to those of a woman without great knowledge. This would fit Susan Mann's observation that poetry created a space for women to speak out on behalf of their loved ones. Furthermore, poetry allowed them to discuss issues that originally belonged exclusively to men. Later, following this trend, women poets talked in their poems more about their experiences of war, their willingness to fight for their country, or even foreign policy. This trend could be considered as a germination of China's "new women." in the

late 19th century.³⁴ However, Shen Yixiu demonstrates precisely the opposite attitude to Xi's. Her outspoken dissatisfaction reveals how consuming and burdensome the exam could be to a gentry wife. Consequently, in facing a husband's taking the civil service exam, a talented wife would sometimes act like a strict mother.

Success

Compared with thousands of other anonymous candidates, Ye Shaoyuan, Chen Zhilin, and Sun Yuanxiang were fortunate. After about ten years' of effort, all of them eventually overcame the difficulties and achieved the utmost goal of the civil service exam—receiving the *jinsshi* degree along with the resulting appointment to an official position. Without question, this was an important event for the couples and their whole families. Ye recorded the success in his self-edited *nianpu*, saying when receiving the news that he was astonished and that his wife Shen could not help shedding tears.³⁵ Unfortunately, there is no celebratory verse in Shen's extant collected works. For the other two, being spouses and part of a household, Xu Can and Xi Peilan both left congratulatory poems to record their joyful moments. In these verses, the two cultured women show themselves as both understanding companions who appreciate and believe in the talent of their dear husbands, and as complying with Confucian notions of wifely virtue to handle domestic problems and to provide moral advice. Interestingly, Xi Peilan also expresses her sense of humor, which creates a space in which she could make jokes with her husband and manifest a nearly equal relationship.

³⁴ Susan Mann, "The Lady and the State: Women's Writing in Times of Trouble during the Nineteenth Century," in Grace Fong and Ellen Widmer, eds., *The Inner Quarters and Beyond*, pp. 311–13.

³⁵ Ye Shaoyuan, *Ye Tianliao zizhuan nianpu* 葉天寥自撰年譜, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 835.

To express her delight, Xu Can composed a long *ci*, a genre in which she excelled, to celebrate the two concurrent gratifying events that she indicates in the subtitle. The *ci* reads:

滿庭芳：丁丑春賀素庵及第，時中丞翁撫薊奏捷。先太翁舉萬曆進士，亦丁丑也。³⁶

To the tune: “Full of Garden Fragrance: The Spring of the Dingchou year [1637], [I Composed this *ci* to] Congratulate Su’an for Passing the Civil Service Examination. At that Time, Father-in-law [Chen Zubao 陳祖苞 (1586–1639)], Who was [Vice Censor-in-Chief and Concurrently] the Provincial Governor³⁷ [of Shuntian] Reported His Triumph in Conquering Jizhou. Late Grandfather-in-law also Received the *Jinshi* Degree during the Wanli Reign, in the Dingchou year [1577].”

麗日重輪，祥雲五色，噌吰玉殿名傳。

A double aura around the splendid sun; five colors show in auspicious clouds,
Bells and chimes jingling, your name spread in the jade hall.

紫袍珠勒，偏稱少年仙。

You wore a purple robe and held a pearled bridle;
It was most suitable to call you a young immortal.

最喜重華奕葉，周花甲，剛好蟬聯。

The most delightful thing was the doubled glory in successive generations;
circling after sixty years, it was just coincidentally exactly continuous.

泥金報，龍旂虎帳，歌凱沸春筵。

The letter sealed with blended gold foil glue reported;
the victory happened in the tiger tents with dragon flags.³⁸

Singing the triumphal hymn exhilarated the spring banquet.

瑤池，初宴罷，冰肌雪骨，文彩翩然。

Besides the beautiful pond in the imperial palace, just after the very first banquet
hosted by the emperor ended;

You possess skin like ice and bone made by snow

Your literary talents are natural and unrestrained.

拜木天新命，紫禁親詮。

You received with deference the new appointment of the magnificent wooden

³⁶ Xu Can, To the tune: “Mantingfang: *dingchou* chun he Su’an jidi, shi Zhongcheng wong fu Ji zoujie. Xiantaiwong ju Wanli *jinshi* yi *dingzhou* ye” in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*, p. 587.

³⁷ In the Ming and the Qing dynasties, “zhongcheng” was used to refer provincial governors (“xunfu” 巡撫, literally means “touring pacifier”). Beginning in 1453, “xunfu” was usually a nominal title granted to the Vice Censor-in-Chief or Assistant Censor-in-Chief “to increase the esteem and influence of the appointee by giving him impeachment powers and direct access to the throne.” Chen Zubao was himself just such a case. For more details, see Charles Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, p. 255.

³⁸ A “dragon flag” was a flag with a pattern consisting of two dragons swirling together; this kind of flag was used in imperial cortege as well as on military occasions. A “tiger tent” was the tent in which the general stayed.

building whose tower almost reaches the sky³⁹;
 From the selection of the person living in the forbidden palace named *Ziwei*⁴⁰ in person.

道是雞窗別也，從今始，再理芸編。

You had been thinking that you should bid farewell to the studio's window with a rooster outside;⁴¹

From now on, you ought to manage books for your future career.

篝燈話，絲綸世掌，何以答堯天。

Remember our conversation under the lantern that each generation of our family was able to hold the imperial decree;⁴²

With what could you repay the tremendous favors and moral greatness of the sovereign in this golden age?⁴³

From the subtitle, it is clear that this year was extremely fortunate for the Chen family, considering both the present time and its history. Chen Zhilin's grandfather, Chen Yuxiang 陳與相 (fl. 1577), also passed the exam in the dingchou year, which was sixty year earlier. The author humbly states that this just happened as a coincidence; however, that Xu Can was able to do so means that the two *jinshi* were attained sixty years apart, showing that she had very carefully considered the time interval. In addition, on the one

³⁹ This term denotes magnificent wooden buildings. It consequently also was another name for the palace library. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, this term also referred to the Hanlin Academy. Here, Xu Can indicates the third meaning; according to Chen Zhilin's official biography, he was appointed as an editor at the Hanlin Academy after passing the civil service exam. See Zhao Erxun, ed., *Qingshi gao*, p. 9635.

⁴⁰ The *Ziwei* constellation was a metaphor for the imperial palace, which was forbidden to all but imperial family member. Thus, "zijin" became a term to indicate the place in which the emperors dwelled. Here, this term is a metonymy for the emperor himself.

⁴¹ This refers to an allusion in Liu Yiqing's 劉義慶 (403–44) *Youming lu* 幽明錄; it says that In the Jin 晉 dynasty, Song Chuzong 宋處宗, who was the magistrate of Gunzhou, bought a rooster that was able to crow for a long time. As he adored it, he placed it right outside a window where he could see it easily. After a while, the rooster learned how to speak Chinese and spoke with Chuzong wisely. Later, "jichuang" would come to mean a private room for study. See Liu Yiqing, *Youming lu* quoted in Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641), et al., comps. and eds., *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚, in Ji Yun et al., eds., *Wenyuange siku quanshu*, vol. 888, *juan* 91, pp. 22a–22b.

⁴² It was said that words first uttered by sovereigns were at first as unreliable as thin silk (絲). When they began to be much used in the society, these words would gradually become like thicker silk (綸). Later, "silun" would indicate an imperial edict.

⁴³ Originally, this term was used in the *Analects* to praise Yao 堯, who was able to imitate Heaven in order to manage and enlighten the common people. The abbreviation "yaotian" afterwards was used to extol the virtues of emperors and indicate that the contemporary period was one of prosperity.

hand, the “coincidence” enabled the family to maintain its reputation and dignity; it also suggests great fortune conferred by Heaven and emperor for Chen and his household. On the other hand, the auspicious celestial phenomena were not only seen as congratulatory signals of the occasion but also as a revelation from Heaven reinforcing, as destined, the honor. Furthermore, the banquet becomes the nexus of the victories both in the examination house and on the battlefield. A letter sealed with glue blended with golden foil usually denoted a report of success in the civil service exams; yet, through the montage method Xu Can adopted, the scene jumps to the military situation represented by flags and tents in the army, and thus the content of the report could refer to either the result of the exam or the triumph of the war against the Manchus. Also, although “dragon flags” and “tiger tents” are common military expressions, “dragon” and “tiger” still hint at the great strength of the army that can lead to victory. The descriptions of the atmosphere reach a climax with the banquet. Though there is a persisting sense of ambiguity, the triumphal hymn at the feast was directed at both triumphs.

The point of view shifts from the banquet to the pleased and confident hero, the poetess’s husband, in the two successive lines. Xu Can’s admiration for Chen Zhilin is expressed in terms of his gorgeous appearance. Not only is his physical appearance exceptional, but his outfit also increases his charm. The poetess chooses “wencai” to indicate his literary talents as well as the sumptuous gown which makes his presence even more prominent. Also, the description of Chen’s image echoes his first appearance in this piece as a person in a purple gown on a horse with pearled bridles, illustrating his high status and delighted spirits. Xu Can further extols her husband as a young immortal, praising his handsome appearance and outstanding abilities, and mentioning his newly-

acquired *jinshi* status as like a novice in Heaven.

In this *ci*, the author does not touch much upon her own inner feelings but plays the role of a virtuous wife urging her spouse to continually pursue his studies and try to realize his capabilities for joining the court. For the former, the lines about bidding farewell to the study room can be understood in two ways: one possibility is that Xu Can is exhorting Chen Zhilin to consider that getting the degree will not be the end of his learning, but the start of his career, and so to continue studying from the day he passes the exam, especially in his new position as an editor at the Academy. At the same time, she also thought that after having failed three times, Chen should perhaps give up his studies to make a living. Fortunately, he not only succeeded in the exam but also got a position in charge of the imperial book collections. Xu suggests that Chen should treasure this precious luck, and therefore should devote all of his talents and abilities to the emperor and the court. It was also the only way that he could extend his family's glory, considered as the ultimate goal of striving for success in the civil service exam. The only intimacy between husband and wife portrayed in this *ci* resides in the scene of their conversation under a lantern. Readers could imagine that in their inner chamber they talked about the future after the exciting celebratory activities.

Although Xu Can only composed one *ci* that relates to the civil service examination, she still manifests one of the typical attitudes that gentry women writers take in this type of poem, namely that of a guardian of Confucian virtue. Like a mother, Xu exhorts her husband about diligence, loyalty, and the importance of the family reputation. This feature is evident in Xi Peilan's works, too. Apart from that, the images of Xi expressed in her poems are more varied. She was a virtuous wife who strictly followed the

regulations and duties imposed on her; she was in addition a great companion who completely understood and appreciated her husband's talents. More importantly, she would display a humorous attitude, no matter whether her spouse faced failure or victory; in light of this, in its poetic representation their relationship seems to be equal.

From the viewpoint of the male authors, unfortunately, there is only one extant work by Sun Yuanxiang about success in the civil service exam, and there are no poems on this theme in Chen Zhilin's present collected works. This may be because male literati, who had earned a degree, were expected to remain humble and abide by the social norms. Accordingly, Sun Yuanxiang in the poem he composed after his victory in the cosmopolitan-level civil service exam, mentioned his own accomplishments but altered the tone from joy to regret, thus diluting at the end the cheerful atmosphere that had until then prevailed.

On the provincial-level civil service exam, although it contains only a single long poem by Xi Peilan speaks variously of gender roles, humor, and family glory:

賀外省試報捷⁴⁴ “Congratulating My Husband on the Report of His Success in the Provincial Examination”⁴⁵

門前一片鳴鈺起，屋裡紡車聲未已

From outside the gate comes the raucous cound of clanging gongs,
Inside the house the sound of the spinning wheel had not yet ceased.

蓬頭奴子笑入來，手持泥金赫蹠⁴⁶紙

A disheveled servant boy came in the house smiling;
In his hands, he was holding a piece of paper with blended gold foil glue.

頻年聽慣康了聲，到此躊躇恐非是

Over the years I have grown accustomed to hearing the sound of informing failure;⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Xi Peilan, “He wei shengshi baojie,” in *Changzhenge ji*, p. 637.

⁴⁵ The translation is modified from that of Wilt Idema and Beata Grant. See *The Red Brush*, pp. 609–10.

⁴⁶ The word used here appears to be a misprint of 蹠. “赫蹠”originally indicates small pieces of silk for writing; later, it would also refer to small, thin pieces of paper.

⁴⁷ Liu Mian 柳冕 (ca. 730–804) was superstitious. While he was preparing for the civil service exam, he said that the term “ankang” 安康 (ease and health) was preferable to “anle” 安樂 (ease and joy), since the pronunciation of the word “le” was the same as “luo” 落 (to fall, to fail the exam). When the list of

When the report arrived here, I felt hesitant and afraid that it was not true.
 竊窺題名錄果真，未必曾參兩同里
 I sneakily peeped at the register listing the names of examinees who had passed.⁴⁸
 This was real after all; it could be that the two Zeng Shens were not from the
 same neighborhood.⁴⁹
 賀客紛來半不識，鄰兒登牆競相指
 Guests to be congratulated came in succession, but over half of them I could not
 recognize;
 Children of neighbors climbed on top of the wall and were competing with each
 other to point at my husband.
 酒漿無從咄嗟辦，解髻欣然脫簪珥
 Having no other way to buy alcohol in such short time; I untied my hair bun and
 gladly took off hairpin and earrings.
 猶記其年癸卯冬，京兆試歸曝總恥
 I still remember that that year was the winter of the *guimao* year;⁵⁰
 You returned from the Capital after the civil service exam and filled with shame
 like fish exposing its gills.⁵¹
 是時重親俱在堂，為罷耗人設酒醴
 At that time both parents were alive;
 They prepared alcohol for the person vexed by failing the civil service exam.⁵²
 我進一言戲慰郎，詩人師待詩人爾 癸卯慰君下第云：“人間試官不敢收，讓與李杜
 為弟子。”
 I present a verse to playfully console my beloved.
 The teachers of a poet should await poet-teachers. *In the guimao year I Comforted you*

who had passed the exam was announced, Liu sent a servant to check it. The servant returned and said to Liu that he had failed. Yet, because the servant was so well-trained, in his report he altered “luo” (fail) to “kang” (ease). In other word, the servant actually used a “wrong” word due to an old habit. Afterwards, “kangle” become a slang term for failing the civil service exam.

⁴⁸ A register that records the names, ages, and birthplaces of those newly-passed examinees. Some registers also list names of examiners.

⁴⁹ There was a murderer with an identical name to Master Zeng, who was one of Confucius’s worthy disciples; some people went to inform Master Zeng’s mother of this news. On their third attempt, Master Zeng’s mother believed the misreport. Reference to this story became a way of indicating the power of rumors. Yet, in this poem, the poetess takes from this story only the fact that the two men have the same name and are natives of the same place. See Liu Xiang, comp. and ed., Fan Xiangyong, annot., *Zhanguo ce jianzhu*, pp. 100–101.

⁵⁰ It was the forty-eighth year of the Qianlong reign, 1783 of the Christian era.

⁵¹ Steep cliffs form a kind of gate over the Yellow River in Hejin 河津 County, which was called Longmen 龍門 (Dragon Gate). Legend has it that many huge fishes would cluster at the dragon gate and try to jump over the gate. Once they succeeded, they would be transformed into dragons; if they failed, their heads would smash on the stony wall, exposing their gills. This term was therefore applied to encountering setbacks or failing the civil service exam. See Li Fang, comp. and ed., *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), p. 348.

⁵² In the Tang dynasty, when people passed the civil service exam, the names of the passers would be recorded on the tower of Ci’en 慈恩 temple. This was called the “Gathering for the Inscribing of Names,” and the lavish feasts held on the banks of the Qu River were called the “gatherings of the Qu River.” Flunking the exam and then getting drunk and eating to one’s fill were called “hitting vexation.” See Li Zhao 李肇 (fl. 818–21), *Tang guoshi bu* 唐國史補 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1979), p. 56.

with the line: “The human world’s examiners do not dare accept you, they cede you to Li [Bo] and Du [Fu] as their disciples.”

豈知戲語作佳讖，應驗直須星一紀

How could I have known that my playful words would become a good omen?
Until it was realized, to our surprise, it took one *ji* of Jupiter circling one round its orbit.⁵³

錢鏞李杜本齊名 座主劉雲房宗伯錢雲岩太史，郎真有福充桃李

Qian [Qi], Liu [Changqing],⁵⁴ Li [Bo], and Du [Fu] originally enjoyed equal fame. *The chairs were Liu Yunfang, who was the Minister of Rites, and Qian Yunyan, who was a Hanlin Academician.*

My husband had the truly good fortune to be their peaches and plums.⁵⁵

我方霑霑喜上眉，郎乃潛潛悲出涕

When I just felt complacent and my joy was clearly shown through my eyebrows;
My husband unexpectedly was woeful and shed unceasing tears.

一第雖榮白屋中，重闈已入黃泉裡

Although a success in the civil service exam fetched honor into the house thatched with white cogon grass,⁵⁶

His parents have already entered the underworld of the Yellow Spring.

空將淚酒告親墳，歡宴何心更燒尾

In vain my husband reported the result at the parents’ grave with tears and alcohol;

What heart had he to attend a jubilant banquet, let alone the celebratory feast called “burning tails”?⁵⁷

我又一言為郎啟，行道顯親自此始

I again present a few words in order to enlighten my husband:

“Conducting the Way and glorifying parents starts from this point.”

明年上苑看花時，還念閨中人側耳

Next year when you see flowers in the imperial garden,⁵⁸

⁵³ Jupiter circles the sun once every twelve years, one for each sign of the zodiac. Chinese astronomers traditionally divided its orbit into twelve stationary positions in each of which it would spend one year. Therefore, Jupiter was regarded as the year star (*suixing* 歲星), and each of its circles as one *ji* 紀.

⁵⁴ Qian Liu refers to two Tang poets, Qian Qi 錢起 (710–82) and Liu Changqing 劉長卿 (fl. 757 - 79), who enjoyed equal fame and were often mentioned altogether.

⁵⁵ “Peaches and plums” indicated disciples. In the culture of the Chinese civil service exam, examiners would become the (nominal) teachers of those examinees they had newly selected in passing them.

⁵⁶ Another meaning of this term is an unembellished house. Both meanings connote common people.

⁵⁷ From the Tang era on, when scholars passed the civil service exam or were appointed to a new position, their friends would throw a party called “burning tails.” The reason they were given this name is that legend had it that when tigers were transformed into human, their tails did not disappear. Only if their tails were burned could they become completely human. The situation was similar to that of people who had just obtained degrees or new posts using banquets to burn their remaining tails. Another explanation is that a fish jumped over the Dragon Gate and it required thunder to burn its tail. Only then could it be transformed into a dragon. Here, the second meaning matches the context better. See Feng Yan 封演 (fl. 756), *Fengshi wenjian ji* 封氏聞見記, ed. Zhao Zhenxin 趙貞信 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), pp. 42–43; Kong Pingzhong 孔平仲 (fl. 1065), *Kongshi tanyuan* 孔氏談苑, in *Congshu jicheng chubaiian* 叢書集成初編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985).

⁵⁸ A banquet called the “Plucking Flower Banquet” would be held for new *jinshi* holders. Since Sun Yuanxiang was going to attend the imperial-level civil service exam, Xi Peilan uses a reference to the

Please remember the person in the inner chamber still leaning with her ear to listen with concentration.

Xi Peilan structured this poem through a comparison between the present and the past and ended it with an earnest wish for the future. The sharp contrast between the two time-points actually rests on the results of the civil exam, namely failure in the past and belated triumph this time. This poem starts with a jolly and raucous sound as background to the pleasant news disclosed in the present scene. In the next line, the author makes a stark contrast between the constant and mechanical sound of the spinning wheel in the house and the sound from outside. Apart from the gendered connotations of inner (内) and outer (外), on the one hand, the two types of sound create an implicit tension between the two lines, while through the descriptions of sound, the poetess deliberately guides the readers' senses and viewpoints, on the other. In the successive couplet, the focal point follows the servant's steps going from the outside into the house. The shiny golden paper illuminates not only his smile but also his untidy hair, which hints at the house's poor financial condition due to the long-term unemployment of the master.

Time begins to play a role in the third couplet. Owing to his past experiences, the poetess cannot at first believe that her husband has succeeded; she vividly shows her hesitation. The two sentences together enable readers to imagine Xi Peilan's disappointment in previous years and even her steps hastening to the door at first and then suddenly stopping due to doubts flashing through her mind. Amid these doubts, she feels an urge to sneak a look at the official register, and convinces herself of its reliability because of the uniqueness of Sun Yuanxiang's name and his native place name at the end.

imperial garden to indicate the capital.

The words the writer selected, “peep” and “it may not be,” reveal her mixed feelings and anxiety. Even though the evidence was apparent, upon debating the matter in her mind, she still could not be completely certain about the result. This also indicated that the tiresomely long striving to pass the civil service exam had effects that were not restricted to the examinee but extended to the whole family and was treated as being of importance in the local neighborhood. Both adults and children played roles in creating a celebratory atmosphere; unknown guests arrive in swift succession; children sit on the wall using their pointing fingers to help readers focus on the house or possibly the hero, Sun Yuanxiang, leaving readers with echoes of cheerful voices in the poem.

Alcohol becomes a clue connecting past and present and showing the differences between them. In addition, it introduces another important theme in this poem, filial piety. Xi Peilan sells her jewelry to buy some wine and hence makes the congratulatory treat possible, which reminds her of another drinking occasion related to the civil service exam twelve years earlier. Sun Yuanxiang flunked the exam and his parents prepared him a comforting meal. Xi Peilan does not emphasize the sorrow but uses a vivid simile to capture Sun’s downcast mood. He not only feels shame about the unpleasant result but also bitterness at the change in his status, which he compares to a fish jumping over the dragon gate. However, his parents seemed to some extent to assuage his frustration, at least he is having them around. Although Sun Yuanxiang assumed a responsibility to bring glory to his family, it was a bit late. When he eventually passed the exam (though, actually, this was not the final stage), his parents’ absence by then had turned his merriment to grief. Through the clear contrast in their reactions, we are left with the image of Sun’s filial piety. While Xi Peilan feels proud of him, to the surprise of readers,

Sun is not happy at all but drowns in his regret, shedding tears of sorrow. From exhortations such as “glorify the plain house” and “report the result at the parents’ graves,” it is clear that victory in the civil service exam is not merely the ultimate goal for a gentry family but also part of the responsibility of its male descendants. In the representation of the poetess, her husband meets the standard for showing such filial piety that he is in fact both humble about his achievement and not in a mood for celebration.

Gender divisions are also conspicuous throughout the poem. First of all, the spatial division of inner and outer that is apparent at the beginning and ending of the poem completely reflects current gender norms. From the title of this poem, albeit that the writer follows the common practice of referring to her husband as *wai* 外 (meaning “outer” and a shorter form of the honorific appellation of husband), the word contains rich gender connotations. This term signifies that Sun as husband takes charge of matters outside of the household, just as expected in Confucian notions of gender order. The division is clearly displayed in the first couplet, too. The poetess portrays two worlds separated by a door, and mentions different sounds to guide readers in switching between the two spaces. Additionally, the distinction is reinforced by gendered codes. In front of the house is the sound of a gong, which represents the victory in the public field that Sun earned in the civil service exam; inside the house is the sound from the spinning wheel, which was the major tool of the manual work that was long considered a part of a woman's duties. At the very end, a similar arrangement is used to close this poem. The first half anticipates her husband’s future success in the next-stage exam by using a public space, the imperial garden, to identify his contribution as well as his abilities. Akin to the second line, Xi Peilan uses a highly gendered expression meaning “the person in the

inner chamber” to refer to herself, while highlighting the space allotted to women. In addition, the author vividly describes her excitement and nervousness through the rather exaggerated picture of herself as leaning to hear good news from the outside. The poem then returns to the implicit sound underlying the line, and echoes the scene depicted in the first couplet.

In accordance with the gendered spatial divisions, the image of Xi Peilan in this poem additionally conforms to notions of the ideal woman in the Confucian ideology. Comparing herself to her husband, as a pious son, Xi Peilan presents herself as a literate and virtuous wife who is capable of handling anything within the household. The first clear indication of this is at the very beginning, with the unceasing spinning wheels. As previously mentioned, weaving is feminine work in the Confucian division of labor, as “men plow and women weave”; readers can easily envision a diligent working woman who is not distracted by the loud noise outside. Also, as Susan Mann points out, a rural family able to fully support itself economically would most likely rely on the woman’s contribution by means of her handwork.⁵⁹ Although the Sun family belonged to the genteel class, Sun’s long exam preparation conferred upon Xi Peilan the need to shoulder at least some part of the responsibility for supporting the family. There was also, as Mann indicates, a hierarchy within women’s work: “The poorest farm women engaged in the home handcrafts of hat weaving and mat weaving, working with harsh, rough materials in cramped, dim quarters Weavers were another cut above; like those who reared silkworms and reeled thread, they lived in households with space and labor to spare.”⁶⁰ More importantly, weaving not only generated pecuniary income for the family, but also

⁵⁹ Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, p. 151.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

was tightly connected to notions of feminine morality. Ban Zhao 班昭 (ca. 45–ca. 117) listed women’s work (婦功) among her famous “four attributes” of women, which later became doctrines of women’s moral education. Weaving, in High Qing discourses, as Mann indicates, connoted industriousness and frugality, and was sometimes also linked to chastity, as the author wished to demonstrate.

Interestingly, in this long poem, the financial condition of Sun’s family is revealed; this confirms the historian’s observation. In the second couplet, a servant coming onto the scene, found the attendant to be disheveled, his clothes most likely worn. This implies that even though Xi’s situation was better than that of many common peasant women, due to Sun Yuanxiang’s long-time absence and unemployment, they were not affluent at all. This becomes even more evident when the poetess needs to prepare alcohol for the guests coming to congratulate her husband. She does not have extra money for this kind of unexpected event, and thus is forced to pawn or sell earrings and a hairpin to solve this urgent problem. It not only shows that they are in a state of financial embarrassment but also displays the virtue that Xi Peilan herself possesses. One of the expectations of virtue for which women were most praised was their willingness to give their personal property such as jewelry or their dowry to help their husband’s family get through hard times.⁶¹ Xi’s virtuous image is here underscored by her reaction of delight at donating these treasures.

In addition to laboriously working, Xi Peilan also assumes the responsibility to advise her husband with wise words. When Sun Yuanxiang seems to lose his zeal, she, as

⁶¹ Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (University of California Press, 2007), pp. 60–61.

if a stricter teacher than a wife, exhortingly reminds him that glorifying parents is part of filial piety. This furthermore consolidates the image of virtuous wife that Xi Peilan presents herself as with her actions as well as words.

Strikingly, the poetess perfectly complies with the Confucian gender norms for a gentry wife, while manifesting a close and nearly equal relationship with her husband. Sometimes she seems like his mentor, but most of the time she treats Sun as her friend. She usually retains a humorous and playful tone when consoling her husband. Twelve years ago, she comforted Sun by saying that the reason for his failure was that he should have been the disciple of Li Bo and Du Fu. It is undoubtedly in the service of a fantasy, but the humorous language she uses in saying this alleviates the depressed air while applauding Sun's poetic talents. In this poem, she emphasizes the identity of the poets, and in light of this, again places Sun, Li, and Du on the same level. Mentioning the poets as a group makes the following word game in which she plays with the surnames of the examiners seem natural. She deliberately finds two renowned poets with the same surnames who enjoyed equal fame in the Tang dynasty as the two officials. As in her previous poem, Xi not only congratulates Sun's success and luck, but also praises the two examiners. In the process, her own knowledge is displayed. Moreover, she uses "wo" (我; I) instead of the more humble "qie" (妾; "humbly, I"), several times in referring to herself.

This relatively long poem ends with a sincere expression of hope and expectation, which is expressed in a rather humorous way. She describes waiting for the good news in a comically exaggerated way. In this final couplet, she is neither a typical longing woman who is an eroticized object of a male gaze and full of disappointed yearnings, nor

an extremely capable wife who can handle everything in the household. At the same time, her selection of a term translated as “the person in the inner chamber” both affirms the Confucian gender ideology and highlights their intimacy. By using this term with its long tradition, Xi Peilan not only alludes to various connotations about waiting women in inner chambers, but also seems to remind Sun that she is the person who shares the room with him.

Akin to the one above, in another quatrain, Xi Peilan plays the same verbal trick with the surnames of the examiners:

子瀟鄉薦出宜興令阮公房，而座主則劉雲房宗伯也。戲之以詩⁶² “Zixiao’s [Composition] in the Provincial [Civil Service Exam] Came out of the Examination Chamber Supervised by the Magistrate of Yixing County, Master Ruan,⁶³ and the Chair was Liu Yunfang, [who was] the Minister of Rites. [Therefore, I] Tease Him with this Poem”

盡說興公最擅場，天台一賦響鏗鏘。

People all remark that Xinggong⁶⁴ is the most marvelous in writing;
One rhapsody titled “Tiantai” resounds like bronze bells or stone chimes whose rhymes are fluent and sonorous.

疑君身是仙桃樹，恰屬劉郎與阮郎

I suspect that you are the immortal peach tree incarnate,

⁶² Xi Peilan, “Zixiao xiangjian chu Yixingling Ruangong fang er zuoju ze Liu Yunfang zongbo ye. Xizhi yi shi,” in *Changzhenge ji*, p. 637.

⁶³ Mater Ruan refers to Ruan Shengji 阮升基 (fl. 1790), whose courtesy name is Hengju 亨舉, and who had a good reputation for his governance. Also, he refused to take bribes to recommend candidates for the provincial civil service exams; he insisted on judging them by their compositions. According to the rules of the civil service exams in the late imperial period, there were several graders sitting in the examination rooms who would grade the compositions written by examinees, and submit the best among them to the chairs, who would make the final selections. These graders were called *fangkao* 房考 (examiners) or *fangguan* 房官 (examination officials), and the process of making recommendations of candidates was called *jianjuan* 薦卷 (recommending examination papers) or *chufang* 出房 (coming out of the examination rooms).

⁶⁴ Xinggong is courtesy name of Sun Chuo, who was erudite and conversant with writing. Both he and Xu Xun 許詢 (?) had held lofty ambitions since their youth. Sun composed a rhapsody titled, “Rhapsody on Mount Tiantai,” and in the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, he has an entry that says, “When Sun [Chuo] had finished writing his ‘Poetic Essay on Roaming in the [Tiantai] Mountains,’ he showed it to Fan [Qi] 范啟 (fl. 350) and said, ‘Try throwing it on the ground; it will surely resound like metal bells and stone chimes. . . .’” On Sun Chuo’s life, see Fang Xuanling, ed., *Jin shu*, pp. 1544–48; the translation is from Richard Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yu: A New Account of Tales of the World* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), p. 145.

Coincidentally belongs to young man Liu and young man Ruan.⁶⁵

In this short poem, the poetess plays with the kind of word games and allusions at which she was an expert. Xi Peilan first links her husband Sun Yuanxiang and the historical figure Sun Chuo 孫綽 (314–71) by means of their identical surname. In extolling the talents of Sun Chuo, she is at the same time giving a compliment to her beloved. On the one hand, she states that the literary abilities of Sun (meaning both Sun Yuanxiang and Sun Chuo) are recognized by the public; on the other, she chooses the term “shanchang” both to indicate appreciation for their outstanding capabilities in general and also to suggest that Sun Yuanxiang’s talents surpassed those of all the other candidates in the exam house. Following the first line, Xi Peilan continues to specifically describe the literary achievements of Sun Chuo. She singles out his rhapsody on Tiantai, which enables Sun Chuo to make his name in literary history; by the same token, so would her husband. Additionally, because his essay was so euphonious and powerful, the examiners were unable to leave him out. “Tiantai” also serves as the link to connect the first and second couplets. Xi again found a famous tale set in the Tiantai mountains, in which the two protagonists have the same surnames as the two examiners. The selection of the ambiguous identifier “lang” 郎 (young man) to describe the two protagonists means that readers will easily project the two examiners onto it. In order to relate Sun Yuanxiang to the two heroes, she then playfully considers him as like the peach tree that Liu Chen and

⁶⁵ The young Liu and Ruan allude to the legend of Liu Chen 劉晨 and Ruan Zhao 阮肇. In this story, Liu Chen and Ruan Zhao entered Mount Tiantai to pick broussonetiae vain and could not find their way out. Thirteen days passed; their food exhausted, they were on the verge of starving to death. They then saw a peach tree with much fruit on the top of the mountain, and they endeavored to climb up to reach it on vines. They ate several peaches and returned. For more details, see Liu Yiqing, *Youming lu* 幽明錄 quoted in Li Fang, comp. and ed., *Taiping yulan*, pp. 354–55.

Ruan Zhao discover. In addition, as previously stated, “peach and plum” (桃李) had long been the symbol of disciples. Hence, through analogy, the three people have close connections not only in reality but also at a legendary level. Her wit is displayed in the clever parallel, including the identical surnames and the link between the peach tree in the tale and the master-disciple relationship, as well as her wild fantasy about her husband being an incarnation of the peach tree. Additionally, her transformation of the deliberate connection into a surprising coincidence conveys humor.

In this short poem, Xi Peilan not only manifests her cleverness and knowledge of literature, but also to some degree reveals her intimate relationship with her husband. It is clear that she still firmly lauds Sun Yuanxiang’s eminent talents, relating Sun and the immortal world as she always does in her poems of this type. Yet, at the time, Xi Peilan banters with her husband as if with a close friend; at least on the poetic level, she displays an equal relationship.

Interestingly, Xi Peilan’s younger brother, Xi Shichang 席世昌 (fl. 1736), passed the provincial civil service exam along with his brother-in-law in the same year. Peilan also wrote a congratulatory poem titled, “Congratulating My Younger Brother *Shichang* Reported to Triumph in the Provincial Civil Service Exam” 賀弟世昌報捷 for his delightful success.⁶⁶ However, unlike with the poem for her husband, the poetess, as an elder sister, acts more like a moral mentor. After a few lines about happiness, she begins to remind her brother of the bitterness their mother endured while educating him, shouldering the responsibility of teaching Xi Shichang after their father’s death. Also, she vividly depicts their mother’s strictness in front of her son while shedding tears behind

⁶⁶ See Xi Peilan, “He di *Shichang* baojie,” in *Changzhenge ji*, p. 637.

his back; her sole hope in fifteen years rested on his success in the civil service exam. In this, the poem exemplifies the importance of success in the civil service exam for the sons of a gentry family. The author also takes a more aggressive attitude in this poem. She firmly asserts that this glory is merely temporary and that he ought to continually be pursuing a higher degree. At the same time, reaffirming that morality is the essence of a person, she exhorts them to resist the temptation of superficial fame.

As the two women poets clearly indicate in their works, the provincial-level civil service exam is undoubtedly not the end of their husband's studies and moral cultivation, nor, surely, the end of a male literati's struggles to climb the career ladder. Ten years after his previous victory, Sun Yuanxiang eventually passed the *jinshi* exam, and wrote a poem recording his emotions. It reads:

春榜放後作⁶⁷ “Composed After the Promulgation of the Spring Examination Result⁶⁸”
 泥金帖子耀春屏，注定文昌第二星 省試會試俱列第二
 The letter sealed with blended gold foil glue⁶⁹ shines on the spring board listing names of those who passed;
 I am destined to be in the second place of the Wenchang constellation⁷⁰. *I got second place in both the provincial civil service exam and the imperial civil service exam.*
 泰岱未嫌居次嶽，惠泉何必望中泠
 Mount Tai does not resent its ranking as the second highest mountain;
 Why does Hui Spring need to hope to be Spring Zhongling?⁷¹
 事傳天上誇仙詠 上諭廷臣今歲進呈十卷，文理俱勝，名愧人間算佛經

⁶⁷ Sun Yuanxiang, “Chunbang fang hou zuo,” in *Tianzhenge ji*, p. 193.

⁶⁸ This is another name for the imperial-level civil service exam, which was held in the second month of the lunar calendar.

⁶⁹ “The letter sealed with blended gold foil glue” was used to inform the families of successful examinees of the news of their obtaining the *jinshi* degree.

⁷⁰ A constellation near the Big Dipper that was long deemed a star or immortal in charge of literary talents as well as the fate of scholars taking the civil service exams.

⁷¹ Zhongling was a spring located in Jiangsu 江蘇 Province that was disappearing owing to silt. It was said that it was the best spring in the world and that its water was the best for brewing tea. Hui Spring is located in Jingmen 荊門, in Hubei 湖北. It was also famous for its limpidity, and the inscription on the pavilion by the spring said, “The water as clear as crystal.” Additionally, Hui Spring is a hot spring and vapor with a reflection of the landscape on water that makes the scenery look like an immortal world. The author uses these two springs as metaphors to indicate confidently that he and the man who obtained first place possess distinctive traits.

My literary ability was transmitted to Heaven, and was praised as immortal's verses *The emperor notified officials in the court that the ten jian that [they] presented this year were outstanding in both writing skills and arguments;*

I feel ashamed that the fame of obtaining the *jinshi* degree is counted as of significance as a classic Buddhist sutra in the world of common people.

獨對春風轉惆悵，舊袍遲換十年青

Alone facing the spring breeze,⁷² my emotion turns to melancholy;

My old robe is changed of late; it had been green for ten years.⁷³

As the title indicates, Sun Yuanxiang wrote this poem after receiving the news that he finally had passed the exam. The words he uses in the first couplet, such as “gold,” “shine,” and “spring” are all bright and glorious, indicating his pleasure as well as pride. In the succeeding two lines, the author applies allusions to illustrate his satisfaction and at the same time justify his own capabilities. Meanwhile, Sun Yuanxiang states not only that his talents have been recognized by the emperor, but also that, thanks to the praise of the son of Heaven, his quality as immortal is confirmed. However, the cheering tone does not last throughout the whole verse. Through his success, the author connects Heaven (that is, the court) and the human world; at the same time, he implicitly criticizes the fact that the fame he has earned from the civil service exams is deemed their sole value, as they are placed on the level of sacred texts. Based on this, he had to strive for this glory regardless of the costs, the most serious of these being that it is time-consuming. The poet ends the poem in a relatively depressed tone; the exhausting process of obtaining the degree has diluted his pleasure. Moreover, Sun uses the word “chi” 遲 (late, deferred) to suggest his regret and guilt toward his parents for being unable to honor them when they were still alive, and toward his wife for being incapable of improving the family economy, which is implied in the color and the condition of their clothes.

⁷² Here, the spring breeze could also refer to the benevolence of the emperor.

⁷³ “Green robe” could indicate people without official posts or low-ranking bureaucrats.

On this delightful occasion, Xi Peilan also composed a poem to congratulate her husband for his great success in the civil service examination. In this poem, she not only expresses her bliss but also indicates her expectation of a brighter future for Sun, surely including herself and the family:

子瀟乙卯省試第二，今捷南宮仍作第二人，詩以寄賀并祝狀頭⁷⁴ “Zixiao [Got] Second Place in the Provincial Civil Service Exam of the Year Yimao [1795]. Now [He] Obtained a Triumph at the Southern Palace,⁷⁵ and Was Still in Second Place. [Composing] a Poem to Deliver [My] Felicitations and to Congratulate [him on being] First Place [in the Evaluative Test after the Palace-level Civil Service Exam] in Advance as Well”

泥金帖子豔雙眸，夫婿公然佔上頭

The letter sealed with blended gold foil glue brightened my eyes;
My husband's name publicly occupied a place on it.

杏苑稍舒才子氣，蘭陔先釋老親愁

In the apricot garden,⁷⁶ you vented a bit the dissatisfactions of a talented scholar; Plucking orchids by the Southern ridge,⁷⁷ you should first relieve the sorrows of your elderly parents.

淮陰漫說無雙士，溫嶠仍居第二流

Do not say that you are an unprecedented scholar in Huaiyin;
Wen Jiao was still ranked as second-class.⁷⁸

我卻隴頭還望蜀，祝君更上一層樓

⁷⁴ Xi Peilan, “Zixiao yimao shengshi di'er, jin jie nanguo rengzuo di'erren. Shi yi jihe bingzhu zhuangtou,” in *Changzhenge ji*, p. 659.

⁷⁵ The term refers to the civil service exam held by the Bureau of Rites; it is another way to indicate the imperial civil service examination.

⁷⁶ This refers to the banquet held to feast the newly-passed *jinshi* holders.

⁷⁷ This is an allusion meant to indicate being filial and serving parents. In the “xiaoya” 小雅 (Lesser Odes) section of the *Shijing* 詩經, there is a poem titled “Nangai” 南陔. Its preface says that the main idea of this poem is that pious sons admonish each other to look after and serve their parent; the poem itself was lost and only an understanding of its gist remained. In the Jin 晉 dynasty, Shu Xi 束皙 (261–300) composed six poems to supplement those odes represented by titles with no actual content. For “Nangai,” he wrote “[One walks] along that southern ridge [to] pluck orchids. [He] misses and longs for [his] parents and [therefore, his] heart has no ease.” Afterwards, “langai” 蘭陔 became a term to indicate serving and taking care of one's parents. Shu Xi's poem is included in *Wen Xuan* 文選. See Xiao Tong, comp., Li Shan, annot., *Wenxuan*, pp. 905–6.

⁷⁸ Wen Jiao, whose courtesy name was Taizhen 太真, was clever, sagacious, magnanimous, and filially pious. He was also erudite and conversant with writing articles. His appearance and deportment were considered decent and he was good at speech; thus, people would like him at first glance. When emperor Yuan 元 of the Eastern Jin dynasty emigrated to the lower Yangzi delta, Wen was one of the officials who exhorted the emperor to ascend the throne. He, in addition, successfully put down two large rebellions led by two warlords, and was consequently appointed Great General. Even so, due to the contemporary trend in elite circles of placing extreme emphasis on one's ancestry, Wen Jiao, whose father was only a relatively lower-ranking official, was considered a second-class person. See Richard Mather, trans., *Shih-shuo Hsin-yu*, p. 274.

I, on the contrary, already have at the Long mountain even looked longingly at Shu⁷⁹;
 Congratulate you as you could climb one more story of the tower.

In the title, Xi Peilan not only adds more details about the previous examination, but also declares her expectation, which is as important to her as his present achievement, to her husband. In the opening couplet, like her husband, she starts with her contentment and pride at seeing the report of the civil service examination. She uses the term “yan” 豔 (brighten) to illustrate the colors and brilliance of the letter as well as her cheerfulness and surprise. Additionally, the term “officially” indicates her pride in being able to express her delight in public and at the same an official document from the court to underscore her feeling that this is real. In the third line, the poetess writes about Sun Yuanxiang’s inner feelings; she assumes that the feast for newly-passed *jinsshi* will slightly alleviate his dismay and displeasure during these years preparing the exam. Then, after reminding her husband of his responsibilities as a son, Xi Peilan shifts to a more humorous tone in the third couplet. On the surface, she is saying that although Sun was outstanding in the lower Yangzi delta, after leaving his native region for the capital, he needed to realize that there were people better than him. At the same time, she compares Sun’s capabilities to those of two famous historical figures, Han Xin 韓信 (230 B.C.E–196 B.C.E) and Wen Jiao (288–329 A.D).⁸⁰ Unlike Sun Yuanxiang, who closes his poem with an expression of melancholy, Xi Peilan ends hers in a positive and cheerful way. She

⁷⁹ This is an allusion suggesting that avaricious men had already conquered the Long area (the present Gansu province) but were still aiming for the Shu region (the present Sichuan).

⁸⁰ Han Xin, a native of Huaiyin (in present Jiangsu), was a famous strategist. Han helped Liu Bang 劉邦 (256–195 B.C.E), the founder of the Han 漢 dynasty, defeat his primary enemy Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 B.C.E), and obtained in recompense a large portion of the territories won. See Sima Qian, *Shiji*, pp. 2609–30.

deprecates herself as a greedy person, though her covetousness was completely legitimate and acceptable in the society of the time. By humbling herself, she encouraged her husband to strive for an even better performance in the evaluation for the granting of official positions. In this poem, Xi Peilan, as a virtuous gentry wife, not only cares about the feelings of her husband, but also encourages Sun to pursue a higher glory, which was considered among the duties of filial piety, for the family.

Comparing the two poems on the victory by Sun and Xi, respectively, they express different attitudes, and interestingly, even though they are both about success in the *jinshi* exam, Xi Peilan is still encouraging her beloved husband to work hard and keep cultivating his virtues even after he has accomplished his principal goal. They both begin their poems as well as the very first line with a shining report. While the informing letter merely represents a clever angle for beginning a poem on exam success, it may show a trace of mutual influence on the part of the two poets. However, they each direct the poems that follow these opening lines onto slightly different paths. A rather passive tone underlies Sun's poem. Although he indicates his being praised for his achievement by the emperor, and uses famous landmarks that are not ranked in the first place as metaphors to describe his situation, negative expressions including "not dissatisfy" and "does not need to" at the same time weaken the otherwise joyful atmosphere. In the ending couplet, which is crucial for determining the general impression of one verse, he points out that his actual mood is "melancholy" and "lonely," and has totally turned the rapturous feeling at the beginning into a downcast one. This depressed tone corresponds to the attitude that Sun has expressed in his poems about lack of control of his fate and the result of the exam; it is an example of what Xi called "the dissatisfactions of a talented scholar."

Unlike Sun Yuanxiang's, the general tone of Xi Peilan's poem is proud and positive. Xi straightforwardly applauds Sun's accomplishments through the factual scene and allusions, which not only affirm his great abilities but also comfort and justify him in getting second place in the civil service examination. In addition, she ends this poem with a confident hope for the future that surely shows that she indeed believed in Sun's talents and was a great companion in his life.

The two works share a similarity in expressions of filial piety. Sun's regret is rooted in the lateness of his triumph; he was not able to obtain the *jinshi* degree on time, namely before the death of his parents, since according to Confucian ideology glorifying the family was among one's obligations to perform deeds of filial piety. In her verse, Xi Peilan places Sun's filial deed before the need to console him emotionally; in this way, Xi uses "xian" (先, first) to describe her husband as expressing filial piety.

In Xi Peilan's collected works, which follow an approximately chronological order, right after the congratulatory poem on Sun's success in the metropolitan-level civil service exam, there is another congratulatory poem on Sun Yuanxiang's realizing the next step of being appointed as one of the editors at the Hanlin Academy after the *chaokao*, the evaluative test:

子瀟報 授庶吉士誌喜⁸¹ “Zixiao Was Reported as Being Conferred [the title of] Hanlin Bachelor [and I Composed this Poem to] Record My Delight”
 郎君侗儻本非常，翔步從容到玉堂
 My husband was originally phenomenally magnificent;
 He stepped slowly and leisurely to the jade hall.⁸²
 壺嶠神仙居後輩，梯階宰相得初枕
 Mount Fanghu and Yuanjiao among immortal mountains are ranked as inferior;⁸³

⁸¹ Xi Peilan, “Zixiao bao shou *Shujishi zhixi*,” in *Changzhen'ge ji*, p. 659.

⁸² “Jade Hall” here could refer to a palace in general or specifically indicate the Hanlin Academy in the Song dynasty.

⁸³ Hu Jiao is an abbreviation for two mountains, Fanghu and Yuanjiao, where immortals lived. According

The prime minister obtains the first batten of the ladder tying it to the position.
 頭銜恰喜當官吉，心事須知報 國長
 The title coincidentally celebrates the auspiciousness of being an official;
 Your ambition should tell you that the time to offer your abilities to requite the
 country is long.
 韓袞王雱如草木，人間何必狀元郎
 If Han Gun and Wang Pang had been disdained as vegetation and woods,⁸⁴
 There would have been no need to have the champion scholar of the civil service
 exam in the human world.

In this poem, Xi Peilan is again playing witty word games. She chose the term “langjun,” which denotes not merely her beloved husband but also the newly passed *jinshi*. In the first couplet, she praises Sun Yuanxiang’s outstanding qualities from his inner capabilities to outer demeanor; based on these exceptional qualities of his, he certainly deserves to be selected out. Additionally, “leisure step” in the second line both talks about his slow progress over the past ten years and contains Xi Peilan’s earnest hope for a bright future in which he gets steadily promoted until he is an official in the court. The succeeding line declares her intention more clearly. She exhorts Sun to consider that although he was not at the top in the exam, the future is more important; she regarded this position as the first step to the utmost one, namely that of prime minister. Next, the poetess is playing with the title of the position, which coincidentally uses the word “auspiciousness” to describe the joyful situation, which she seems to take as an omen of good fortune. Indeed, it is easy to imagine from a financial perspective that getting an official position would at

to *Liezi* 列子, there are five mountains of immortals located in a valley located several hundred million *li* east of the Bo Sea, with Fanghu and Yuanjiao listed as second and third.

⁸⁴ Han Gun, Han Yu’s grandson, won first place in the *jinshi* exam in 866. Han’s personality was unrestrained, and he uttered impolite remarks at the banquet for the newly-passed *jinshi*. Wang Pang (1044–76), Wang Anshi’s son, passed the *jinshi* exam in 1067. Wang Pang was famous as a prodigy, and his oeuvre contained over ten thousand words before he had reached the age of twenty. Wang was also unbridled and arrogant; he was unwilling to be a lower-status official. The phrase “caomu” (vegetation and woods) refers to what is mean and low.

least ensure a promising income for the family. As a virtuous gentry wife, Xi then takes up a common moral position to advise her husband to exhaust his talents for the court, while the word “chang” also connotes her expectation that Sun Yuanxiang will climb the ladder of bureaucracy. In the last couplet Xi Peilan mentions two historical figures who were famous for their talents and received the *jinshi* degree, calling attention to Sun’s abilities as well as the function of the civil service examination.

In terms of this theme, poems congratulating people for their success on the civil service exam, there are similarities in the writings of Xu Can and Xi Peilan. On the one hand, both adopt an undeniably joyful tone and overtly praise their husbands. On the other hand, in accord with the contemporary wifely norms, they also exhort their husbands to cultivate their virtues, such as diligence and loyalty, and shoulder the responsibility of carrying on the family reputation. Both Xu and Xi applaud the outstanding appearance and demeanor of their husbands; this is especially apparent in Xu’s *ci*. From their descriptions, not only does the delighted mood obviously show through the husbands’ actions as well as manners; the poetesses are also suggesting that their inner talents and capabilities are as distinguished as their appearance. Additionally, in the poems on the civil service exam, entering the bureaucratic system is compared to entering the ranks of the immortals. As Chen Zhilin and Sun Yuanxiang are newly-passed *jinshi* holders, they are both depicted as the youngest ones in the immortal world. This metaphor suggests that receiving the degree enables them to be elevated to a higher stratum, as if jumping from the human world to Heaven. Based on the decisive importance of the civil service exam to a gentry household, the two gentry wives are not only in a rapturous mood but also urge their beloveds to endeavor to maintain their

dignity. By doing this, they also present themselves as virtuous spouses who can assist their husbands to remain on the right path.

Owing to the small number of extant lyrics on this theme composed by Xu Can, it is not entirely fair to say that the expressions she uses are monotonous. Yet, Xi Peilan displays other dimensions of her relationship with Sun Yuanxiang and of her own image. In addition to opportunely providing good advice, she also contributed her labor and personal property to the family finances. Furthermore, she was willing to belittle herself as a “greedy” woman who aggressively pushes her husband to pursue higher achievements. Most importantly, Xi Peilan expresses a great sense of humor, which suggests both the closeness and equality of their relationship.

The equality of the relationship between Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan was not only manifest in their poetic conversations, but also displayed for their mutual friends through poetic and epistolary communications. Poems on the civil exam evidently could enable a woman poet to find a place within the public social life of her husband. By means of poems on the result of the civil service exam, she could not only express her thoughts about the exam system but also build connections with other literati in her husband’s social circle. Thus, when complimenting the examiners, Xi Peilan to some extent places herself in a similar position to Sun Yuanxiang as a pupil of the two examiners. On account of the victory that Sun Yuanxiang wins in the civil service exam, as Sun’s spouse, the poetess thus becomes their nominal disciple as well. More significantly, this type of poem actually circulated within the poetic circle to which Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan belonged. There is an entry in Yuan Mei’s poetic remarks saying:

乾隆乙卯，秋闈榜發。主試劉雲房，錢雲岩兩先生入山見訪。余告之曰：“今科第二名孫原湘，余之詩弟子也。渠癸卯落第時，室人席佩蘭以詩慰之，有‘人間試官不敢收，讓與李杜為弟子’之句。今孫郎出二公門下，唐錢劉與李杜並稱，伊婦之詩，竟成讖耶？”二公大喜。余將此語札致佩蘭。渠覆書云：“讀先生札，夫婦笑吃吃不休，因蘭‘賀外’詩，與老人心心相印也。”其詩載女弟子集中。⁸⁵

In the yimao year of the Qianlong reign (1795), [after] the list [of examinees who passed] the autumn civil service exam⁸⁶ was promulgated, two masters, Liu Yunfang and Qian Yunyan, who were in charge of this exam, entered the mountains and paid me a visit. I told them, “Sun Yuanxiang, who got second place in the present exam, is my disciple learning poetry. When he failed the civil service exam in the guimao year (1783), his wife comforted him with a poem; there is a line saying that the world’s examiners do not dare accept you as their disciple. They have ceded you to Li Bo and Du Fu so that you can become their pupil.⁸⁷ Now, young man Sun is one of the disciples of you two masters; in the Tang dynasty, Qian [Qi] and Liu [Changqing] were [often] mentioned as parallel. Does the poem by his wife surprisingly turn out to be a good omen?” The two masters were greatly thrilled. I [wrote] this dialogue in a letter sent to Peilan. Her reply says, “While reading the letter from the Master, [we] husband and wife [both] chuckled unceasingly, since [Pei]lan’s “Poem on Congratulating [My] Husband” is in sync with the mind of the [Suiyuan] old man [Yuan Mei] on the same idea.” Her poem was recorded in the Collected Poems of Women Disciples.⁸⁸

Leaving aside the credibility of their tacit understanding, readers are able to find in this short passage Yuan Mei directly quoted in Xi Peilan’s poetic line as a basis of flattery. On the one hand, Yuan proudly praises both his disciple and his talented wife, in that the former was capable of winning out over other numerous candidates in the civil service exam, and the latter is gifted enough to write clever poetic lines. On the other hand, as Dorothy Ko astutely observes, through introductions from male relatives and friends, the woman writer would be able to enter into the public sphere. Xi in this way was formally

⁸⁵ Yuan Mei, *Suiyuan shihua* 隨園詩話 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982), p. 810.

⁸⁶ Since the provincial civil service exam was held in the autumn, it was also called by this name.

⁸⁷ The translation is modified from Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush*, p. 609.

⁸⁸ The correct title of this collection is *Suiyuan nüdizi shixuan* 隨園女弟子詩選. The poem that Yuan included in this anthology is “Fuji baoba shi yi wei zhi” 夫子報罷詩以慰之.

introduced to the two officials, who originally were not at all members of her social circle. Additionally, Xi Peilan mentions another poem which addressed Sun Yuanxiang to her master, a poem that thus reaches beyond the inner chamber. Moreover, the intimacy between husband and wife is clearly shown in two ways, from Yuan's perspective and in Xi's reply. Yuan Mei's remarks also reinforce the idea of a companionate couple in which the wife writes a poem to assuage her husband's pain while facing the frustration. In Peilan's letter, readers could envision themselves reading Yuan's letter by turns. When both notice the remarkable coincidence, they look at each other and laugh knowingly. Xi's statement supplements Sun's line that their inner chamber is just like a classroom and that they will read the same books on the same desk.⁸⁹ From this perspective, the expression "having matching thoughts in mind" refers not only to Xi Peilan and her master but also to Xi and her husband.

Apart from the male master, Yuan Mei, the female mutual friend of the literary couple, Gui Maoyi 歸懋儀 (1761–1835/6)⁹⁰, also took the advantage of the civil service

⁸⁹ Sun Yuanxiang, "Bingqi" 病起, in *Tiancheng ji*, p. 5.

⁹⁰ Gui Maoyi, whose courtesy name was Peishan 佩珊, was a famous and active woman poet, calligrapher, and painter in contemporary literary circles. Gui Maoyi's versatility came from her cultural elite family; her predecessors had all passed at least the lowest level civil service exams and her mother Li Xinjing 李心敬 (d. 1765) was a poetess, too. Gui married her cousin, whose father was Gui's uncle on her mother's side. Gui's uncle and father-in-law published works written by his sister and daughter-in-law together in 1791. Additionally, Gui's mother-in-law, Yang Fengshu 楊鳳姝 (?), was one of Li Xinjing's poetic friends who also often wrote poems to Gui Maoyi. Furthermore, according to Wang Tao's 王韜 (1828–97) records, Li Xuehuang was erudite and struggled for a long time to succeed in the civil service exam; they were both conversant with poetry and their frequent poetic exchanges were appreciated and envied by their friends. In her middle age, after her father's death and her father-in-law's retirement, she had to support her family by being a teacher of the inner chamber, since Li Xuehuang devoted all his energy to the exam. Based on this, Gui Maoyi on the one hand enjoyed more physical freedom than other women poets, and she had more chances to get in touch with contemporary literati, on the other. She was a close poetic friend with many other women poets. Some of them were among Yuan Mei's women pupils, such as Xi Peilan, Qu Bingyun 屈秉筠 (1767–1810), and Wang Qian 王倩 (born after 1760), and some of them belonged to the society of poetesses centered around Chen Wenchu 陳文述 (1771–1843), including Wang Duan 汪端 (1793–1838) and Wu Zao 吳藻 (ca. 1799–ca. 1862). Also, she was appreciated by many male literati such as Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727–1814), Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 (1792–1841),

exam to pay a compliment to Sun's talents as well as to poke fun at their harmonious marital relationship. This also attests that the civil service examination was a perfect occasion not only for the representation of an intimate conjugal relationship but also for the involvement of other people commenting on and celebrating this close interaction. As with Sun and Xi, Gui Maoyi was one of Yuan Mei's disciples. Although their hometowns were very close,⁹¹ Gui and Xi did not know each other until they both entered the coterie of Yuan's school. Afterwards, they frequently sent poetry back and forth and even had opportunities to meet and discuss poetry together.⁹² More interestingly, not only were the two renowned women poets bosom friends, but also Gui Maoyi and her erudite husband, Li Xuehuang 李學璜 (dates unknown), were both acquaintances of Sun Yuanxiang's. Their deep friendship is particularly evident in the poetic dialogue between Xi and Gui about Sun's success in the *jinshi* exam. According to Xi Peilan's reply, it indicates that Gui is returning to Shangyang 上洋 in Guangdong 廣東. In other words, Gui Maoyi not only composed a series of celebratory quatrains, but also congratulated her intimate friend in person. The poetess writes in an entirely joyful and humorous tone. Gui spends one verse on praise of Sun's genius and accomplishment, one on Sun and Xi's

and of course her master, Yuan Mei. See Wang Jiangdong 王江東, "Gui Maoyi jiqi shici yanjiu" 歸懋儀及其詩詞研究 (Master Thesis. Xibei Normal University, 2013), pp. 7–16.

⁹¹ Xi Peilan was a native of Zhaowen 昭文 County and Gui Maoyi was from Changshu 常熟. Zhaowen was located in the eastern region of Changshu, and was split from it during the reign of Emperor Yongzheng (1732), who considered that the population of Changshu was too large. Nonetheless, the administration remained in the same town. In 1912, Zhaowen County was again merged into Changshu.

⁹² In *Tianzhenge ji*, there are a total of twenty-one poems that Xi Peilan wrote to Gui Maoyi. According to those extant works, Gui Maoyi used to send skirts and some medicines to Xi Peilan when she was sick; also, Peilan documented their delight in composing poetry together on a cold night. Sun Yuanxiang, too, wrote verses recording the arrival and departure of the Li-Gui couple. When Gui Maoyi paid a visit to their place alone, Sun penned a poem bidding her farewell, and Xi Peilan also composed one matching her husband's rhymes.

companionate relationship, and the other on lauding Xi Peilan's talents and teasing both of them about the superiority or inferiority of their gifts.

In the poem, “Congratulating Grand Historian Sun Zixiao in Addition to Presenting this Poem as a Gift to Madam Daohua” 賀孫子瀟太史兼贈道華夫人,⁹³ Gui first alludes and transforms a famous poetic line admiring the extraordinary poetic abilities of Li Bo, which was written by Du Fu to praise Sun Yuanxiang. The poem suggests that when the poet composes a verse, it will resonate with the outer world through natural phenomena such as winds, rain, and thunderbolts; when a verse is completed, it will move ghosts and deities profoundly to weeping and sorrow. The author honors Sun and his brilliant talents by comparing him with the two greatest poets in Chinese history. More importantly, the analogy reminds readers of the comforting poem written by Xi Peilan saying that Sun's poetic style has the merits of works by Li and Du and he ought to be their pupil. This may suggest that Xi's poem addressing her husband is being circulated within her coterie. In the second line, appreciation for Sun's outstanding talents is still the essence of the description. However, the disparity between his literary abilities and the final ranking he achieved in the exam creates a regretful undertone, which rests on the expression “originally ranked as the top.” Following the underlying tone of pity, Gui Peishan, as a friend, obviously is expressing her empathy for his inability to achieve a position truly corresponding to his renown.

In the second poem in the series, the poetess turns to the other side of the scene—home—connecting to the previous verse through the first line describing Sun's returning

⁹³ Gui Maoyi, “He Sun Zixiao taishi jian zeng Daohua furen,” in *Xiuyu xucao* 繡餘續草, *juan* 2, pp. 8a–8b. Retrieved from Ming Qing Women's Writing database, <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/english/index.php>

home. Additionally, by means of a shift in the focus, the other addressee, Xi Peilan, is formally introduced to readers through a literary activity that manages to reveal the closeness between the couple. The poem reads:

秋江蘭槳送還家，閨閣聯吟興倍賒
 On the autumn river, oars made of magnolia sent you returning home;
 In the inner chamber, when you and your wife linked poetic lines,⁹⁴ the spirit
 and enjoyment were doubly ardent.
 料想捲簾人得意，西風憔悴笑黃花
 I presumed that the person raising the blinds was pleased and proud;
 She had been languishing in the west winds, but was able to laugh at the
 withering yellow blossoms after your arrival.

Gui Maoyi portrays Sun Yuanxiang's travel home; selecting a fourth-tone fricative word, “song” 送, to capture the rapid speed of this boat, she swiftly changes the focal point from outside into the inner boudoir, an intimate space belonging to a husband and wife couple. More importantly, the author emphasizes their matching talents, shared interests, imaginative discussions, and physical proximity as strengthening the pleasure they enjoy. Furthermore, the delight that they find derives not only from being able to meet with the beloved one and compose verses together, but stems largely from the delayed triumph in the *jinshi* exam. In the next couplet, Gui Maoyi applies and transforms famous allusions penned by the most renowned woman poet in Chinese literary history, Li Qingzhao, poking fun at Xi Peilan. Li Qingzhao, in her celebrated song lyrics about laments in the inner chambers, mentions “Last night the rain was intermittent, the wind blustery. . . . I tried asking the maid who raised the blinds; she said the crab apple blossoms were as

⁹⁴ The term “lianyin” is the same as “lianju” 聯句. They both indicate a manner of poetic composition, namely one in which every person who joins the composition writes at least one line in succession until a poem has been completed.

before”⁹⁵ 昨夜雨疏風驟 . . . 試問捲簾人，卻道海棠依舊。 Here, it is apparent that Gui Maoyi changes the one raising the blinds from a maid to a woman who is a talented writer, referring to the original author Li Qingzhao and at the same time to Xi Peilan as well. On the one hand, Maoyi undoubtedly is comparing the latter to the former to show her appreciation of Xi’s genius and extraordinary poetic skills. On the other hand, by placing “the person raising the blinds” in the context of the husband’s leaving home for the civil service exam, she gives the phrase the connotation of the great longing and expectations of the return of Sun Yuanxiang following upon his success. And since the news that Xi Peilan receives this time is indeed excellent, Gui also teases her by revealing her elation and joy along with the rolling up of blinds.

In the very last line, the poetess is continually playing with another allusion by Li Qingzhao. Qingzhao, in her famous lyric, which was believed to be a piece sent to her husband when he was absent from home, writes, “Do not say that she is not extremely heartbroken. The west wind lifts the blinds; she is as wasted as the yellow flowers [i.e. chrysanthemums]”⁹⁶ 莫道不銷魂，簾捲西風，人似黃花瘦。 Gui Maoyi molded this allusion into a humorous joke to further make fun of the great joy Xi Peilan enjoyed. By following in Li Qingzhao’s steps, Gui includes a double layer into the term “juanlian” 捲簾: the writer suggests that Xi used to be as downcast as her predecessor, who did not even have the energy to raise the blinds to look out of the window, the chilly autumn wind rolling them up instead. The blinds unveil the pining woman persona. In light of this, Xi Peilan again becomes the embodiment of Li Qingzhao in a universal sorrow that

⁹⁵ The translation is by Ronald Egan. See his *The Burden of Female Talent*, p. 327.

⁹⁶ The translation is modified from Ronald Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent*, p. 222.

originates from yearning. At the same time, this term also contains a contrary perspective. In the description here, the woman persona rolling up the curtain is in high spirits after receiving the news that Sun Yuanxiang has passed the *jinshi* exam, which means that she can expect his return. Xi Peilan feels pride and happiness as she faces with a smile the withering chrysanthemum in the west wind. The wilting yellow flowers therefore are no longer a symbol of the yearning woman but just external scenery. By reversing the famous lines, Gui Maoyi enriches the image of the waiting woman in a playful way that differs from a depiction of a merely woeful yearning.

Another allusion that may have been intended in the couplet is about a poetic competition between a literary couple in which the wife greatly outshines the husband. According to *Langhuan ji* 琅嬛記, Li Qingzhao once sent a lyric to her husband, Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠 (1081–1129), when he was away from home to express her loneliness and yearning. The anecdote is as follows:

Yi'an sent the song lyric, "Double Ninth Festival to the tune 'Drunk in the Blossoms' Shade'" to Mingcheng in place of a letter. Mingcheng exclaimed with admiration and was ashamed that he himself had never written such a fine composition. He vowed to attempt to outdo her. He refused all visitors and for three days and nights had no thought of food or sleep. He managed to compose fifty songs, and he showed them to his friend Lu Defu [陸德夫], having first slipped Yi'an's composition in among them. Defu poured over them for two or three days, and eventually came to Mingcheng, to whom she said, "There are only three good lines in the entire group." Mingcheng asked which ones they were. Defu recited, "Don't say she's not extremely heartbroken,/ The west wind lifts the blinds,/ She's as wasted as the yellow flowers." These are lines from Yi'an's composition.⁹⁷

易安以“重陽醉花陰”詞函致明誠。明誠嘆賞，自愧弗逮，務欲勝之。一切謝客，忘食忘寢者三日夜，得五十闕，雜易安作，以示友人陸德夫。德夫玩之再三，曰：“只三句絕佳。”明誠詰之。曰：“莫道不銷魂，簾捲西風，人比黃花瘦。正易安作也。

⁹⁷ The translation is modified from Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent*, p. 222. Egan's book includes an astute analysis of Zhao Mingcheng's mental pressure and frustration due to the brilliance of Li Qingzhao.

Although *Langhuan ji* had a poor reputation for authenticity and credibility, the text was widely circulated during the late Ming period,⁹⁸ including this anecdote about Li Qingzhao, which has often been quoted and generally deemed true, even today. Presumably, Gui Maoyi had read and was familiar with the story. The unofficial account of the poetic competition and the composition by husband and wife together may hint at the complacency Xi Peilan expresses, in part in light of her expected victory over her husband in their poetic sentence-linking game in the inner chamber. In the next poem in this series, Maoyi directly and jokingly voices the theme of surpassing her partner in literary ability. The poem reads:

河汾講習鬥嬋娟，名冠瑤池壓眾仙

In the lectures held in the area between the Yellow River and the Fen River,⁹⁹ beauties contested their poetic skills;

The fame of Xi Peilan not only was crowned champion in the Jasper Pool¹⁰⁰ area, but also surpassed numerous immortals.

卻笑秦嘉才絕世，一生低首鏡台前

⁹⁸ According to Luo Ning's 羅寧 research, *Langhuan ji* belongs to what he classified as "weidian xiaoshuo" 偽典小說; authors of this type of book falsified anecdotes to satisfy the need to use marvelous and obscure terms and allusions in poetic writing. Albeit that *Langhuan ji* is attributed to Yi Shizhen 伊世珍 of the Yuan dynasty, Luo suggests that *Langhuan ji* may have appeared around 1540–96. Additionally, he argues that almost all of the anecdotes in this books are fictional, including the famous Li Qingzhao story. Xu Bo 徐（火勃）(1563–1639) also commented that, while stories of this kind could provide material for jokes, the fact that of late there were many people quoting them in poems, was ridiculous. *Siku zongmu tiyao* also indicates that records in *Langhuan ji* were mainly erroneous or trivial. Despite the authenticity of the story, describing a poetic competition between a literary couple, which was based on the imagination and appreciation of Li Qingzhao's unprecedented talents, showed that the idea of a companionate couple was widespread. See Luo Ning, "Mingdai weidian xiaoshuo wuzhong chutan" 明代偽典小說五種初探, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究 91 (2009): 31–47.

⁹⁹ During the final years of the Sui 隋 dynasty (581–618), Wang Tong 王通 (584–617), a renowned Confucian scholar, delivered lectures in the area between the Yellow River and Fen River. Nearly a thousand people came from various places to become his disciples; many of his pupils later made great efforts to establish the succeeding regime. Based on this fact, the term indicates that under the guidance of a famous teacher, there numerous distinguished men and women of talents would cluster. Here, Gui Maoyi uses this phrase to refer to Yuan Mei's school.

¹⁰⁰ In Daoist belief, the Queen Mother of the West (西王母), the highest female deity, who was transformed from the pure *qi* of yin and governed all other women immortals, resides in the palace by the Jasper Pool. The author utilizes this allusion to denote the coterie of Yuan Mei's female disciples.

I then laughed that despite the fact that Qin Jia¹⁰¹ possessed incomparable talents in the world,
In his whole life, he has to lower his head in front of the mirror stand.¹⁰²

Continuing the undertone of the wife's brilliance from the previous poem, in the last poem of this series, the writer overtly praises Xi Peilan's talents. Gui Maoyi states that Xi Peilan is truly outstanding among Yuan Mei's female disciples. Additionally, the author chooses "chanjuan" to indicate not only the gender of the (imaginary) lecture audience, but also Xi's elegant posture and lovely appearance. Gui Maoyi further draws a parallel between the poetry society that she is part of centered around its nominal master, and women immortals. The idea of regarding a group of talented women as immortals seems to resonate with the identical notion that plays a prominent role in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Yuan Mei, in his miscellaneous remarks on poetry, states that in Cao Xueqin's novel of this title, the garden called Grand Prospect Garden is his own Sui garden. Wu Xinlei 吳新雷 in his investigation provides records from two other contemporaries of Yuan's who both clearly point out that the Grand Prospect Garden is actually Sui Garden. Even though their remarks refer to both the locale and the garden itself, they also reveal the circulation of this novel in contemporary literary circles.¹⁰³ Additionally, according to Ellen Widmer's research, from poetic reactions and numerous sequels written by

¹⁰¹ See Chapter 1, note 74. Gui Maoyi, too, uses this historical figure to indicate Sun Yuanxiang.

¹⁰² This refers to the dressing table placed in the inner chamber for women to put on makeup. Due to its importance in women's lives, it became a metonym for women themselves.

¹⁰³ See Wu Xinlei 吳新雷 and Huang Jinde 黃進德, *Cao Xueqin Jiangnan jiashi congkao* 曹雪芹江南家世叢考 (Taipei: Longshijie chubanshe, reprint, 2015), vol. 1, pp. 48–53. However, both where the Grand Prospect Garden actually was and whether the garden actually existed or not are the subject of heated debates. Wang Ren, 王人恩 in his essay, "Daguanyuan de yuanxing jiuqing zai nali: dui hongxueshi de yige jiantao" 大觀園的原型究竟在哪裡：對紅學史的一個檢討, categorizes the previous hypotheses into four kinds: Yuan Mei's garden, the Mansion of the Prince Gong 恭, the western garden of the Bureau of Silk Weaving, and a fictional garden created by Cao Xueqin. For more details, see Wang Ren'en, "Daguanyuan de yuanxing jiuqing zai nali," *Dongnan xueshu* 東南學術 (2006.2): 161–68.

women authors, we can infer that the novel had a certain female readership;¹⁰⁴ Wu Zao 吴藻 (1799–1862), one of Gui Maoyi's poetic friends, wrote a lyric to express her feelings upon reading the novel. It would be reasonable to speculate that Gui Maoyi was familiar with the analogy and the poetic competition in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In the closing couplet, the poetess assumes a humorous tone in making fun of Sun Yuanxiang. Obviously, Gui Maoyi applauds Xi Peilan in her defeat of Sun Yuanxiang, who is certified by the court and already won against numerous candidates. Also, the allusion to the famous literary couple, Qin Jia and Xu Shu, indicates the equal poetic capabilities of husband and wife. Additionally, by means of the joke, the poetess echoes the allusion about Li Qingzhao in the preceding verse. By the same token, Xi Peilan again becomes inseparable from the great predecessor, whose poetic talents surpassed those of her husband in both contemporary opinion and the reception of the later generations. Apart from literary talents, the very last line presents Sun as an obedient husband in the vivid and comical description, which corresponds to how he portrays himself in the poem sent to Xi from the capital. This suggests a reversal in the spousal relationship from the Confucian convention in their inner chamber. In the view of a mutual friend, Sun and Xi enjoy a harmonious connubial relationship, which allows teasing. Their relationship achieves a certain degree of equality in the poetic realm, because of which at the same time the close relationship is made public.

In reciprocation along with her farewell, Xi Peilan also composes a series of three poems matching with Gui Maoyi's rhymes. However, in Gui's collected works, all three replies are included, though the third one, which praises the beauty and talent of her

¹⁰⁴ See Ellen Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book*, pp. 22, 219–47.

bosom friend as well as her deep affection, is omitted from Xi Peilan's collected works. It is clear that she consciously avoided responding directly to the poem applauding her. She deliberately complies with the cultural norm of being humble in the face of compliments especially for women. Interestingly enough, she quotes the complimentary lines from the title not only to show her gratitude but also to indicate her pride in her exceptional literary talents, an expression that reoccurs in the matching poem. The poem reads:

佩珊賀子瀟登第詩有“卻笑秦嘉才絕世，一生低首鏡台前”之句，次韻奉答並送歸上洋三首錄二 “There are Lines in the Poem in which Peishan [Gui Maoyi] Congratulates Zixiao for Having Passed the Exam, Saying ‘I then Laughed that Despite the Fact that Qin Jia Possessed Incomparable Talents in the World. In His Whole Life, He Has to Lower His Head in Front of the Mirror Stand.’ I Matched the Rhymes to Compose this Series to Reply and Send Her off to Return to Shangyang” recording two out of three [Hereafter referred to as “Peishan Congratulates Zixiao”]

一斛珍珠十斛愁，艸堂雙管闢風流。

One bushel¹⁰⁵ of pearls-like tears¹⁰⁶ contains ten bushels of sorrow;
In the thatched cottage, two writing brushes completed our extraordinary and refined literary works.

女媧若使開金榜，應點蛾眉作狀頭

Suppose Nüwa¹⁰⁷ had initiated the golden name board of the palace exam,
She should have appointed beauties¹⁰⁸ to be the top champions.¹⁰⁹

Echoing the original pieces of her friend, Xi Peilan opens her verse with a typical description of *guiyuan*. Pearls are a common metaphor of tears in *guiyuan*-style poems,

¹⁰⁵ “Hu” 斛 (bushel) is a measurement of capacity.

¹⁰⁶ Here the author uses pearls as a synecdoche of tears. On the one hand, literati often used the similarity between the shapes of pearls and tear drops; on the other hand, legend had it that the tear drops of mermaids would become pearls.

¹⁰⁷ Chinese legend has it that Nüwa was primogenitor of human beings. *Taiping yulan* quotes Yingshao's *Fehngsu tongyi* 風俗通義, saying Nüwa kneaded mud into rich and noble people, while the common people came from the splashing of mud in raising a rope from a muddy pond. In addition, people believed that Nüwa institutionalized the marital system, which should rank people by their surnames. Afterwards, Nüwa was regarded as the deity in charge of marriage. For more details, see Li Fang, comp. and ed., *Taiping yulan*, p. 672; Luo Mi 羅泌 (b. 1131), *Lushi* 路史, in *Wenyuange siku quanshu*, vol. 383, p. 83a–b; Ma Su 馬驢 (1621–73), *Yishi* 譯史, in *Wenyuange siku quanshu*, vol. 365, p. 81a.

¹⁰⁸ Since the antennae of the silkworm moth are slender and curved, this expression was used to describe the beauty of a woman's eyebrows. Later, this term became a metonymy for beauty.

¹⁰⁹ Xi Peilan, “Peishan Congrats Zixiao,” in *Changzhen 'ge ji*, p. 659.

and she applies them as a condensed expression of sorrow, to underline her sadness in waiting for her husband. In a dazzling but static scene, her sorrow is beautified, and her existence eliminated. In the succeeding line, the writer shows up but in an implicit way, as two writing brushes used to represent the competing poets. This creates an ambiguity in the identification of the two poets in the literary competition. It could be a depiction of the present situation of the delightful meeting with her bosom friend, or it may indicate a poetic contest between husband and wife in their inner chamber. On the one hand, it directly refers to Li Xuehuang and Gui Maoyi in their studio, which is called “shuangguan” 雙管 (a pair of brushes). Read together with a strong belief in the capabilities of women mentioned in the latter part of the poem, it served as an evident compliment to Gui Maoyi. On the other hand, resonating with Gui Maoyi’s verses, it also suggests Xi Peilan herself and her husband. The poetess then stretches her fantasy to include a possible system in which women are allowed to attend the civil service exam. She also suggests, by omitting all gender-specific terms from the poem’s first half, that whether the exam was open only to talented women only or to both sexes, women would be the champions. Also, when placing Nüwa, considered the deity who had institutionalized the marital system, in the context of a spousal relationship, she uses allusion to this imagined situation to suggest the likely superiority of women in domestic literary competitions.

In another poem, which Xi Peilan composed to portray and honor her close friend Li Xiu 李秀 (courtesy name Canhua 餐花), the woman poet most frequently mentioned by Xi in her collected works, Xi also clearly takes the same stance. In her opinion, women were not only not inferior to men in their talents, but often could to outdo their spouses.

She states that “While Li took out books, tea spilled into her arms with laughter. Xu Shu frequently won over Qin Jia” 抽書笑潑懷中茶，徐淑往往贏秦嘉。 She uses a famous anecdote between Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng as an analogy to Li Xiu. When defeating her husband in a competition to memorize allusions as entertainment, Li Qingzhao often “laughed so hard that the tea would spill in my lap.”¹¹⁰ The triumph being hinted at here becomes apparent in the following line, showing that the wife’s outdoing the husband was a common result. Instead of straightforwardly pointing to Li Xiu, the poetess continues to adopt celebrated historical figures in comparison to her friend. Yet, the message of her great confidence and pride in women’s capabilities is clearly presented. Besides Gui Maoyi, Xi Peilan, in a verse replying to another poetic bosom friend, Qu Bingyun 屈秉筠 (1767–1810),¹¹¹ uses an allusion to Zhao Mingcheng and Li Qingzhao as an analogy to Qu and her husband. “The tea bowl is originally used for competing with Mingcheng; “Bizhen tu”¹¹² should teach Yishao¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Translated by Stephen Owen, See Li Qingzhao, “Jinshi lu houxu” 金石錄後序, in *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginning to 1911*, ed and trans. Stephen Owen (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 592.

¹¹¹ Like Xi Peilan, Qu Bingyun, whose courtesy name was Wanxian 宛仙, was a native of Changshu and one of Yuan Mei’s female disciples. Wanxian was conversant with painting. She once gathered twelve women writers, including Xi Peilan, Gui Maoyi, and Li Xiu, and allotted to each of them twelve floral immortals who were originally historical figures. Qu portrayed a painting of this elegant assembly, too. Qu was married to Zhao Tongyu 趙同鈺; according to Sun Yuanxiang’s record, Zhao and Qu enjoyed a very harmonious relationship in their inner chamber, and people compared them to Zhao Mingcheng and Li Qingzhao. Yet, interestingly, in the same biography, Sun also indicated that Qu really disliked this comparison. When Sun was teasing her about the name of their studio being the same as Li’s courtesy name, Qu asked Sun to give the studio a new name. She also stated that she had always considered the name as an unfavorable one. See Sun Yuanxiang, “Qu ruren zhuan” 屈孺人傳 and “Ruigong huashi tu” 蕊宮花史圖, in *Tianzhen’ge ji*, pp. 515, 604.

¹¹² “Bizhen tu” 筆陣圖 is an essay that discusses the principles as well as the theoretical and aesthetic meanings of wielding brushes and brushstrokes. It was said that the author of this piece was Madam Wei 衛夫人 (272–349), but some people attributed it to Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–61), or to an anonymous author. According to the inscription appended to “Bizhen tu” that was attributed to Wang, Madam Wei was one of Wang’s masters.

¹¹³ Yishao was the courtesy name of Wang Xizhi, a calligrapher who is important in Chinese art history and is called the Sage of Calligraphy.

[how to write] calligraphy” 茶甌自與明誠鬪，筆陣應教逸少書。 This again attests to the deep and strong belief in women’s talents and capabilities in Xi Peilan’s mind.

Additionally, the frequent use of allusions to Li Qingzhao shows that Zhao and Li are an example of a companionate literary couple at that time, while also suggesting the great number of companionate spouses within Yuan Mei’s circle.

Xi Peilan used the term “*fengliu*” 風流 not only to describe the couple’s refined and superb writing styles, but also to suggest they share the same qualities of a prominent scholar (名士). Her use of the term implies that Xi believed that women poets could compose as loftily as men did. In light of this, it could serve as a footnote to Kang-i Sun Chang’s observation that women writers tended toward the conscious imitation of male literati both in attire and in writing styles.¹¹⁴ Additionally, the term “*fengliu*” was often used at banquets held for the new *jinshi* degree holders. Xi Peilan may have been imagining Gui Maoyi and herself as attending the celebratory feast. Moreover, the last two lines indicate her hope to have a chance equal to that of men, and be able to outshine other male competitors.

After the Exam, In the Officialdom

Passing the exam was never the end of the process. Not only did exam success or failure greatly affect gentry families, but after getting a ticket to join the bureaucracy, so did the vicissitudes of the political careers of male literati. Sun and Ye did not serve in office for a long time: Sun quit shortly after getting the position, and Ye became a recluse

¹¹⁴ For more details, see Kang-i Sun Chang, “Ming-Qing Women Poets and Cultural Androgyny,” pp. 11–25.

after having been an official for six years. Both of them did not leave behind much evidence about how they made the decision, including in their communications with their wives. Being dismissed from his office was a serious setback to Yihui. However, the impact of this was only hinted at in some of his poems revealing his low spirits, and while Taiqing would encourage him, they did not discuss it in their poetic communications at all. However, being an official or a hermit is a recurring topic in the poetic dialogues between Chen Zhilin and Xu Can, especially those written after the dynastic transition.

Xu is famous for expressing her nostalgia for the previous dynasty through lamenting her fate as an abandoned wife. The celebrated poetic work of hers that is often considered the example of the mixture is her lyric, “To the Tune: Remembering the Beauty of Qin, Following the Rhymes of Su’an’s Work on Spring Feelings” 憶秦娥：春感次素庵韻. She references the capricious weather in spring to connote the change in private life as well as the public realm. The poetess directly states, “Half a spring of fragrant warmth/Surprisingly, has been cast away” 半春香煖，竟成拋撇。¹¹⁵ The painful sob that follows for “[the shift between] old benediction and new favor” 舊恩新寵 has often been regarded as indirectly criticizing Chen’s betrayal of the Ming emperor.

Chen Zhilin, in his own original piece,¹¹⁶ ambiguously states that he feels extreme melancholy every third month of the lunar calendar, without pointing to the actual reason. His distress seems to rest with the outside scenery; unlike in a typical spring scene, Chen

¹¹⁵ Xu Can, To the tune: “Yi Qin’e: Chungan ci Su’an yun,” in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*, p. 581. The translation is modified from Charles Kwong’s translation included in Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, eds., *Women Writers of Traditional China*, p. 340.

¹¹⁶ Chen Zhilin, To the tune: “Yi Qin’e: sanyue” 憶秦娥：三月, in *Fuyun ji*, p. 245.

depicts broken hills and damaged trees with branches covered with snow. The desolation and coldness he speaks appear to reflect his downcast emotion. The cause of this emerges more clearly in the lyric's latter half. From songs summoning the soul in a sad melody and a cuckoo singing to bleed, which is attributed in the referenced legend to crying for the lost country, his woe can be surmised to result from the dynastic transition, following warfare, and aggrieved reminiscence over the fall of the previous ruling house. In the end, the author uses metaphors for a happy marriage, namely ribbons with a pattern of mandarin ducks tied with a "kindred-heart"-style knot, to suggest his past connection with the Ming dynasty. Chen follows the literary tradition that uses the husband and wife relationship as a trope for the relationship between the sovereign and officials; the hidden regretful tone also implies that he had enjoyed the appreciation of the previous court, which he had served. Considering his choice retrospectively, when again in the same context, Chen reveals the pain of a turncoat. In his own lyric, composed first, Xu Can applies a metaphor suggesting the way in which her abandonment by her husband and the dynastic transition seemed intertwined.

However, Xu Can and her husband are not always on the same page with each other about the political judgment that Chen Zhilin makes. As Xiaorong Li has meticulously shown, Xu Can and Chen Zhilin take divergent stances on the choices the latter makes in his career. Although Xu Can wrote a congratulatory lyric expressing her delight at Chen's success in the *jinsshi* exam, afterwards, she consistently urges her husband to withdraw from officialdom and live as a hermit away from these political struggles and dangers. Nevertheless, Chen Zhilin is not convinced by the argument of his wife. He eagerly wants to expand his political life and contribute his talents to the court. When encountering

setbacks, Chen has thoughts of retirement; yet, this seems to merely express his momentary frustration. At one point, Xu expresses her dissatisfaction at Chen's hesitation and indecisiveness; she directly points out that what he zealously pursues is an illusory fame, which results in the severe vicissitudes in his career, and reveals his ineptness at playing politics. However, Chen Zhilin, for his part, does not have the same feeling as his wife; he eloquently defends himself: "Inside Peach Blossom Spring, as chaotic as tangled hemp; rather, times of peace would have misty clouds" 桃花源裡亂如麻，還是太平時節有煙霞。¹¹⁷ In his justification, Li suggests that, during a turbulent period, no place can be utterly isolated from the outside world. He states that it is only in times of peace and tranquility that people can enjoy beautiful scenery, while he at the same time reveals his appreciation for the prosperity of the mundane world. In agreement with this, even after he has lost power and lives in banishment, he tearfully recollects the golden age of his wandering around the Milky Way (referring to the imperial garden), wearing the official hat and red brocade. He concludes, "The splendid palace with paired phoenix decorations on the roof towers jutting into clouds and mists; what a home of the heavenly son!" 雲裡帝城雙鳳闕，好個天家!¹¹⁸ Although conscious of an unreachable distance between the imperial palace and himself, his exclamation and gaze suggest complicated feelings mixing regret, sadness, and reminiscence. Clearly, he is full of longing for his glorious past, while the original poem that his wife composes concentrates completely on her sorrow at his inability to return home. Based on this, it is clear that their thoughts on his

¹¹⁷ Chen Zhilin, To the tune: "Yumeiren: ganhuai" 虞美人：感懷, in *Fuyun ji*, pp. 249–50.

The translation is from Xiaorong Li, "'Singing in Dis/harmony' in Times of Chaos," p. 232.

¹¹⁸ Chen Zhilin, To the tune: "Langtaosha: ganxing he Xiangping yun" 浪淘沙：感興和湘蘋韻, in *Fuyun ji*, p. 246.

political choices diverge from his irreconcilably, a fact that also emerges clearly in terms of the issue of loyalty to the Ming dynasty.

Xu Can and Chen Zhilin possess different opinions on loyalty to the Ming emperor and his court. She remained steadfast about defending the defeated Ming house; in light of this, her insistence on his withdrawal from officialdom for the life of a hermit additionally embodies another layer of political gesture: being *a yimin* 遺民 (loyalist) who refuses to serve a regime established by a non-Han tribe. She intertwines her yearning for her homeland with laments for the past dynasty as well as the devastation of the country by constant warfare. Additionally, in looking retrospectively, apart from the harmonious conjugal relationship, Xu Can reveals her deep regret at “this new pair of wings, leading us astray, to the Isle of Ying” 雙飛新翼, 誤到瀛洲.¹¹⁹ “The Isle of Ying” is the land where immortals reside, and she is speaking here of the great honor of being selected into the imperial literary institution. However, for her as his wife, their marriage analogized as flying in a pair and on parallel wings, following her husband to a high position in the new court would be a mistake resulting from misjudgment. At times, Chen Zhilin would express grief over the ending of the previous dynasty; yet, this seems to be only a temporary sentiment. In the context of dialogue between the husband and his wife, who is pressing and insistent on the issue, Chen is in need of providing a justification for his choice and finding a way to mitigate its effects on his wife. Consequently, he, “attribute[s] dynastic changes to the will of Heaven,”¹²⁰ in order to explain that the change actually belongs to a natural cycle and has less to do with ethical

¹¹⁹ Xu Can, To the tune: “Fengliuzi: tong Su’an ganjiu” 風流子: 同素庵感舊, in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*, p. 590. The translation is from Xiaorong Li, “‘Singing in Dis/harmony’ in Times of Chaos,” p. 240.

¹²⁰ See Xiaorong Li, “‘Singing in Dis/harmony’ in Times of Chaos,” p. 237.

loyalty. Furthermore, he claims that even if he would like to take an action of resistance, he is unable to find comrades. Chen also denies that the kind of heroic action associated with the famous assassin, Jing Ke, would be a better choice than pursuit of a prosperous life. Reviewing what they experienced, Chen after all does not accept Xu Can's advice, and ends up in exile in Manchuria, where he will die. Nonetheless, his insistence on naming his collection "Floating Clouds" may suggest that Chen Zhilin in the end was admitting that what he sought and desired was an illusory fame, which like floating clouds easily dissipates without leaving a trace.

Except in directly challenging Chen Zhilin's political discernment, as a companionate partner, Xu Can like other gentry wives opportunely offered her mental support and encouragement. When her husband rouses himself, startled, from a despondency rooted in the failure of his career ambitions and subsequent long sojourn as well as separation from his family,¹²¹ Xu Can comforts him with the depiction of a serene landscape, and urges him to enjoy its beauty with a carefree mood as a recluse.¹²² More importantly, not only does she exhort her husband in their intimate chat under the rainy window not to deny his own past; she also astutely transforms his depictions of mountains as being as sharp and terrifying as a knife into an optimistic scene. In alluding to Li Bo's famous poetic line, "Never tiring of looking at each other" 相看兩不厭,¹²³ Xu Can both softens the portrayal as two facing mountains support each other, and suggests her feeling of tenderness towards her husband. Similarly, when they revisit the

¹²¹ Chen Zhilin, To the tune: "Niannujiao: Xihu yu gan erque" 念奴嬌: 西湖雨感二闕, in *Fuyun ji*, p. 262.

¹²² Xu Can, To the tune: "Niannujiao: Xihu yu gan ci Su'an yun" 念奴嬌: 西湖雨感次素庵韻, in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*, p. 589.

¹²³ Li Bo, "Duzuo Jingtingshan" 獨坐敬亭山, in Peng Dingqiu, ed., *Quan Tangshi*, p.1858.

site of their old mansion, which was destroyed in the war, Chen expresses anguish and woe over the severe change that has taken place.¹²⁴ He laments the disappearance of the flowers that used to be in the garden and the warm memories they shared of viewing those blossoms in the past. Even though Xu Can begins her matching lyric with mention of her previous admonishment that everything in the world will not flourish forever, which now becomes an ominous prophecy, in the latter half of the lyric, she turns to comforting her husband.¹²⁵ Despite those blossoms vanishing, they still make paintings and poems on the flowers preserving their beauty and fragrance. Furthermore, she encourages Chen Zhilin to indulge himself from now on in the pleasures of touring and appreciating flowers. The lyric ends with the exhortation, “Do not wait until flowering branches get old” 切莫待，花枝老。¹²⁶ This indicates not only that she treasures the best times for blossoming, but that she also recalls their lingering under the silk tree, which has a connotation of intimacy between a man and a woman. Placed in the initial line, it also suggests that Chen ought to cherish her beauty while there is time.

In the poetic dialogues between Chen Zhilin and Xu Can on the career of the former, Xu Can feels empowered to engage in a discussion of political issues like military withdrawal and dynastic transition. Undoubtedly, this entails respect and an open mind on the part of Chen Zhilin, though in fact he does not follow her advice to take action. Yet, thanks to the poetic communications with his spouse, the exchanges not only preserve the rare voice of a turncoat, but also present a dimension of a gentry wife different from the conventional image of obedience within the conjugal relationship.

¹²⁴ Chen Zhilin, To the tune: “Shuilongyin: guo jiudi ganfu” 水龍吟：過舊邸感賦, in *Fuyun ji*, p. 263.

¹²⁵ Xu Can, To the tune: “Shuilongyin: ci Su’an yun ganjiu” 水龍吟：次素庵韻感舊, in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*, p. 590.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Both Xu Can and Xi Peilan are gentry wives who accompanied their husbands throughout their lengthy efforts to obtain a *jinsshi* degree. The poetic communications between the two couples on the topic of the civil service exam in the course of the husband's taking it have some interesting features. First of all, no matter whether they pass or fail, the two male literati, as candidates and then *jinsshi* holders, follow the etiquette of modesty to the extent that they do not (as they perhaps should not) talk too much about their personal triumphs. There is no poem recording his success at the civil service exam in the surviving edition of Chen Zhilin's collected works. However, in contrast, the two poetesses overtly praised their husbands. To Chen and Sun, their cultured wives were their strongest supporters. Furthermore, to Xu and Xi, the achievements earned by their spouses were considered as their own accomplishments, and thus, they continually exhorted their husbands to cultivate their morals. On the contrary, Shen Yixiu, witnessing her husband's constant failure in the exam, discloses its dark side, in negatively impacting their lives as it did.

There is considerable emphasis on the family in the poems of this type. The most prominent and direct reason is that the civil service exam was the ultimate goal in life for literati men and their families. Shen Yixiu serves as a perfect example of this. Women, who were excluded from the system of selection, participated in the game through educating and exhorting their male relatives, while success in the civil service exam became an internalized value for gentry women. The fame earned by their husbands from the exams was regarded as a family glory as well as a filial duty to the household.

Women authors manifested their own virtues mainly through their domestic roles, which strictly followed Confucian gender norms. They presented themselves as great helpers of their husbands, and as willing to devote their labor and property to the household so that their spouses could pursue a career with full concentration. Moreover, since the choice of a political career could have enormous impact on the entire family, this was often a hotly disputed issue in companionate couples, who shared their leisurely literary interests as well as more serious concerns like the choice of a career.

Issues internal to the household were not the only ones to be discussed. Through their male relatives, husbands in both these instances, gentry women writers would have more chances to see their poems reach the outside world, and to wield influence thereby. Women poets could join literary societies, which is how Xi Peilan met Yuan Mei. Also, by means of their poems about the civil service examination, women writers could develop connections with the examiners, with whom they otherwise would not likely be acquainted. Furthermore, their poems about their husbands' exam-taking created a space for them to evaluate the selective system. In works by Chen Zhilin and Sun Yuanxiang, the poets did not explicitly utter their dissatisfactions with the exam system, their poems only expressing their recognition of inadequate talent to enter the system that they had failed to join. But they remained confident about their own talents, and their poems were part of a long tradition of lamenting their “huicai buyu” 懷才不遇 (failure to meet anyone who appreciates their talents as they should be appreciated). Sun Yuanxiang states that, like an actor on a stage, he has absolutely no control over his fate. The uncertainty to some extent became the target of Xi Peilan's criticism. From the examiners' inability to approve Sun's capability, she inferred that probably some of the examiners were not well-

qualified to assume the responsibility of selecting outstanding people for the court. She powerfully voiced her grievance on behalf of her husband. In response to what their husbands had undergone, women authors were able to make their opinions public concerns by publishing their poetic communications with their husbands. Xi Peilan's attitude changed to one of compliance with the system, and she was able to forge a social network after Sun got the degree, but in general their ability to express their opinions in public criticism, as well their joining their husbands' social circles, does indicate that these women enjoyed some agency.

Although these two pairs of literary couples left few poems written by both husband and wife in response to the same incident, their poetic conversations were still quite clear. In the face of failure and loss, male literati endeavored to comfort themselves and justify the result of the exam, and so did their cultured wives. When they finally overcame the barriers, they remained modest. For their part, the gentry wives, as steadfast supporters of their husbands, deemed their husband's achievements as belonging in part to them as well; hence they not only expressed joy or sorrow according to the results, but also made it clear that they were the ones who best understood their spouses' talents. When their own talents were underrated, women authors would defend them powerfully, implicitly shedding doubt on the system. In Xi Peilan's case, humor enabled her not only to convincingly encourage her depressed husband, but also to form a connection with the examiners. A sense of humor can serve on paper as a crucial means to equalize the uneven gender relationship in reality. In a humorous context, the poetess reveals their close relationship as similar to that of same-sex friends. Together with the circulation of poetry, the literary equality together with the affection revealed in the poetic

communications led to the establishment of the image of a perfect companionate match from the viewpoints of their mutual friends. Furthermore, the publicity of the poetry made possible by context of the civil service exam not only allowed feelings of pride and affection to be overtly mentioned in poetic works, but also enabled friends of the couple to comment playfully on their harmonious relationship. The poetic exchanges between Xi Peilan and her female friend Gui Maoyi, on the topic of success in the civil service exam, express a perfectly clear confidence in women's capabilities, even as often surpassing those of their husbands. This also reveals their ambition and discontent with the status quo. Their use of humor also plays an important role in their marital intimacy, which is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Intimacy

Introduction

This chapter focuses on intimate relationships as described in the poetic works of the targeted literary couples. “Intimate,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means “pertaining to the inmost thoughts or feelings; proceeding from, concerning, or affecting one's inmost self; closely personal.” It can also mean “close in acquaintance or association . . . characterized by familiarity (with a person or thing),” or indicate what is “of sexual intercourse.” The close relationships manifested in these poems range from inner emotions, such as affection towards spouses, remembrance of how they met, and jealousy, to descriptions of the woman writer’s body by both her husband and herself. Sickness and joking were both occasions that enabled poets to talk overtly about their affection with the wives, even discussing body parts and the scent of the other’s body. Interestingly, we can also find poems in which women writers depict their own bodies, whether they are addressed to same-sex friends or husbands; however, due to Confucian gender norms and restrictions, women poets could at most express their desire for possession but not their gaze on men’s bodies, even when the man was their legal spouse. Aside from the use of bodily descriptions, the four pairs of couples displayed their affection for their spouses in various dimensions of their daily life such as festivals, birthdays, travel, religious practices, and even cooking. On those occasions, the couples not only provided mental support to significant others but also voiced opinions that were often different from each other’s.

In Chinese literary history, there is a long tradition of describing the beauty of women; from the *Shijing* 詩經 and the *Chuci* 楚辭, which have been regarded as the

two origins of Chinese literature, to the *yuefu* 樂府 (folk ballads), there are many famous pieces depicting women's beauty. By the time of the Southern Dynasties (420–589 AD), a subgenre named *gongti* 宮體 (palace-style poetry), which centers on women's bodies and emotions, emerged. As scholars have shown, the princes of the Liang 梁 dynasty (502–57 AD) and their literary coteries¹ were greatly influenced by the fashion in the preceding era of the detailed portrayal of landscapes and objects, as well as contemporary folk songs, *wuge* 吳歌 and *xiqu* 西曲, which usually include a female persona overtly talking about her affections, or even desire, and sometimes descriptions of her appearance.² Their works are compiled as an anthology titled *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠 (*New Songs from Jade Terrace*). These male authors adopted the elaborate writing techniques used to depict natural scenery and objects such as flowers and mirrors to lavishly portray women's physical appearance, including their clothes and ornaments, aspects of their bodies such as snowy skin and aromatic scents, and the alluring gestures of activities like napping or dancing. These male poets also wrote about the longing and laments of the female personae; yet, the poets did not express their own emotions by masking them under the female characters, but described the sentiments of the latter with a detached stance. In light of this, it can be seen that these male writers treated women and their emotions similarly to objects that they meticulously depicted,³ while at the same time, “gazing” at all of these from a certain distance.

¹ Chen Dadao 陳大道, *Shijimo yuedu gongtishi zhi diwang shiren* 世紀末閱讀宮體詩之帝王詩人 (Taipei: Yunlong chubanshe, 2002), pp. 73–193; Paul Rouzer, *Articulated Ladies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), pp. 117–56.

² *Ibid.*

³ Gui Qing 歸青, “Nanchao gongtishi yanjiu” 南朝宮體詩研究 (Ph.D diss., Shanghai Normal University, 2003), pp. 65–69.

In the 1970's, Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of "male gaze" to feminist theory in analyzing Hollywood movies, in her landmark article titled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Her main ideas in this essay can also be well applied to the *gongti* verses. Generally, Mulvey argues that the gaze of a male subject that looks into a private world including a woman figure, both sustains a voyeuristic fantasy and regards the other people who are objects of this gaze as icons. This gaze "coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order,"⁴ and subjected its targets to a controlling subjectivity. A dichotomy is operative here according to which the gazing male subject is active and the female object essentially passive. Further, the dominant position of the male subject is also displayed in the fact that the story line seems controlled from a masculine point of view. Under the male gaze, according to Mulvey, women function as doubly erotic objects, for male characters and authors on the one hand and audiences, whose point of view is constructed through identification with this masculine gaze, on the other.⁵ Interestingly enough, however, as Tian Xiaofei points out, according to the compiler of the *Yutai xinyong*, this anthology was directed at elite women readers and intended for their reading pleasure.⁶

Taking a famous *gongti*-style poem, the trace of the male gaze is evident:

北窗聊就枕，南簷日未斜
 Idly she goes to the pillow by the northern window,
 The sun has not yet angled over the southern eaves.
 攀鉤落綺障，插撥舉琵琶
 The hook pulled, the gauze screen rolled down,
 The plectrum put away, the lute is hung up.
 夢笑開嬌靨，眠鬟壓落花

⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (1975), p. 8.

⁵ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," pp. 6–18.

⁶ Tien Xiaofei, "Literary Production: Catalogues, Encyclopedias, Anthologies," in *The Cambridge History of Chinese History*, eds. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), vol. 1, p. 256.

Smiling as she dreams, lovely dimples appear,
 Sleeping on her chignon, crushed petals drop.
 簾文生玉腕, 香汗浸紅紗
 Patterns of the bamboo mat impressed on jade wrists,
 Fragrant perspiration soaks the red silk.
 夫婿恆相伴, 莫誤是倡家
 Her husband keeps her constant company,
 So do not mistake her for a courtesan.⁷

In this poem, from the beginning, readers follow the gaze from outside into a boudoir. Even though the eyesight is briefly blocked by a canopy, the resulting pause stimulates the reader's fantasy rather than obstructing it. The protagonist then appears in a sleeping posture, which is full of evocative erotic hints. The descriptions center on details of her body, such as her skin, scent, and sweat, suggesting imaginatively an arousing sensual atmosphere. While in the concluding lines the author "corrects" the potential misconceptions with attestation of a legal marital relationship, the overall tone is playful, not serious.

Gongti verses afterwards gradually went out of fashion on the literary arena; yet, the erotic qualities of *gongti* did not at all disappear. This type of poetry was revived in the late Tang period, and then its resources were largely bequeathed to *ci*, which burgeoned at almost the the same time with the revitalization of the *gongti*-style poetry of the late Tang period.⁸ The subgenre underwent another resurgence in the form of poetry in the hands of Yuan Mei and his coterie. Yuan Mei maintained that poetic composition should base itself on true nature and spirit, as poetry comes from *qing* 情. In his poetic theory, he considered *qing* as involving from its very beginning affection between men and

⁷ The translation is from Grace Fong, "Engendering the Lyric," p. 112.

⁸ For more details on how *ci* acquired its erotic traits, see Grace Fong, "Engendering the Lyric," pp. 107–18.

women; based on this, he praised erotic verse for its genuineness, and even classified “Guanju” 關雎 (Fishhawk), the first poem of the *Shijing*, as being of this kind.⁹

Following Yuan’s ideas, his cousin, Yuan Shu 袁樹 (1730–?), wrote many poems with a sensual content, which have been criticized as lustful and vulgar by modern scholars.¹⁰

As Yuan Mei’s primary disciple, Sun Yuanxiang also had a substantial number of *gongti*-style verses. His six *juan* of erotic poems were separately grouped as *waiji* 外集

(additional sections) and appended to collections of his works. According to his declaration in one of his poems, at least some of his collected works were published while he was alive.¹¹ In these *gongti*-style poems, Sun not only followed the tradition of this subgenre, namely to present detailed descriptions and voluptuous desires, but also highlighted the importance of *qing*.¹² More significantly, even though the addressees of most of the verses in the *waiji* are uncertain or are merely imagined figures, there are three to four poems that clearly describe his wife, Xi Peilan, and reveal their mental and physical intimacy. In this type of poems, jokes, which were often expressed through allusions, and illness, are two prominent features that facilitate the creation of an intimate atmosphere.

⁹ See Yuan Mei, “Da Jiuyan lunshi shu” 答戴園論詩書, in *Xiaocang shanfang xu wenji* 小倉山房續文集, in *Yuan Mei quanji* 袁枚全集, ed. Wang Yingzhi 王英志 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1993), vol. 2, p. 527; Yuan Mei, “Zai yu Shen dazongbo shu” 再與沈大宗伯書, in *Xiaocang shanfang wenji* 小倉山房文集, in *Yuan Mei quanji*, vol. 2, p. 285.

¹⁰ Wang Yingzhi 王英志, “Yuan Mei da dizi Sun Yuanxiang lun: xinglingpai yanjiu zhiyi” 袁枚大弟子孫原湘論: 性靈派研究之一, *Anhui daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 安徽大學學報 (哲學社會科學版) 1997.4 (1997): 12.

¹¹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Ke Tianzhen ‘ge ji sijuan cheng” 刻天真閣集四卷成, in *Tianzhen ‘ge ji*, p. 178

¹² Cheng Meihua 程美華, “Zifen qing wu si wo shen, shenqing chu shi wo zhiyin: Sun Yuanxiang de yanti shi” 自分情無似我深, 深情除是我知音: 孫原湘的豔體詩, *Huadong shifan daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 華東師範大學學報 (哲學社會科學版) 2010.3 (2010): 65–70.

Jokes and Humor

Humor serves as a significant method to convey intimate feeling between husbands and wives in literary creation. By means of teasing, women writers could interact with their husbands in a manner similar to communications between male literati. Some examples are discussed in chapter two. At the same time, humor enabled them to voice their intimacy, and even their desire for possession of the other, which contradicted poetic conventions. Additionally, although the number of poems belonging to this type are few, in Xi Peilan's works, jokes create a space for her to expose certain parts of her body to the "public." However, due to the sense of decorum in poetic composition, especially with regard to gendered restrictions for women poets, they resort to allusions, rather than direct descriptions, to express humorous points. More significantly, in the extant collected works of this couple, readers are able to read responses of both husband and wife, including how Sun Yuanxiang reacts to his wife's jealousy. Their dialogue starts with Xi Peilan's fingernails; the verse by Xi reads:

以指甲贈外 “Using My Fingernails as a Present for My Husband”
 摻摻指爪脆珊瑚，金翦修圓露雪膚
 On slender fingers, fingernails are as if fragile coral;
 Using metalline scissors to trim them smoothly so that they are round and
 disclose snowy skin.
 付與檀奴¹³收拾好，不須背癢倩麻姑
 Giving them to my beloved to carefully collect and preserve;

¹³ “Tannu” originally is Pan Yue's 潘岳 (247–300) sobriquet. Pan had a gorgeous appearance and charming demeanor. When he went out, women who met him would either join hands to encircle him or throw fruit onto his carriage to express their admiration. Later, this term became a way to indicate women's husbands or lovers.

It is needless to ask Magu¹⁴ when his back is itchy.¹⁵

Xi Peilan in this lovely quatrain reveals her closeness to her husband through the special gift of cut-off fingernails. Applying the descriptive techniques of *yongwu* 詠物 (poems on things), the gaze, from the author herself, roams over the appearance, the coral color, and the texture. Afterwards, when she starts cutting fingernails, the fragile quality also refers to the clear sound of trimming them down. The cold tactility of metal sensed on skin is hinted at in the words “jin” 金 and “xue” 雪. Although hands are not considered as sensitive as bound feet in the gender ideology, the exposure of her skin still suggests sensuality through the use of a phrase, “xuefu,” that occurs often in *gongti*-style poetry. In the poem’s latter half, Xi Peilan humorously represents their intimacy and her desire for possession. She asks her husband to take good care of this present; since it comes from her body, it can serve as a substitute satisfaction for his longing for her. Also, by utilizing “tannü,” the poetess suggests not only the closeness connoted in this term of endearment but also her husband’s handsomeness. Furthermore, perhaps because of its tonal restriction, the word “nu” also conveys the sense that Sun is completely obedient to her. Additionally, in using the allusion to Magu, who has slender fingers suitable for scratching, represents the poetess’s unwillingness to let other women get close to her husband or touch his body.

¹⁴ Magu is a Daoist female deity. According to Ge Hong’s 葛洪 (284–364) *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳, two immortals, Magu and Wang Yuan 王遠, descended to Cai Jing’s 蔡經 place. Cai saw that Magu’s hands looked like birds’ claws, and thought it would be great to have such claws to scratch his itchy back. Wang read his mind and chided him for having this idea which was an insult to Magu, who was after all a deity. More details see Ge Hong, *Shenxian zhuan jiaoshi* 神仙傳校釋, annot. Hu Shouwei 胡守為 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), pp. 92–95.

¹⁵ Xi Peilan, “Yi zhijia zengwai,” in *Changzhen’ge ji*, p. 638.

Sending something close to her body, such as jewelry or underwear, or something directly from her body such as hair as a present to a lover was a common way for women to express their affection. Due to their closeness to the body when worn, these things served as perfect embodiments of women's accompanying their beloved ones. This closeness to the body also undoubtedly gave those presents an aura of intimacy. In addition, according to the Confucian idea of filial piety, "our bodies—down to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety"¹⁶ 身體髮膚，受之父母，不敢毀傷，孝之始也。 Because of this, shearing tresses off or cutting fingernails signifies a strong commitment. On top of this, hair especially, on account of the connotations of the homonym between "fasi" 髮絲 (threads of hair) and "xiangsi" 相思 (mutual yearning), was the most widely-used gift. Compared to hair, giving nails as a love token was less common. It first appears in poetry in a poem by a Tang-dynasty woman poet, Chao Cai 晁采¹⁷ (fl. 766–79), that was presented to her husband, Wen Mao 文茂. It states, "Under the bright windows, I played with my jade-like fingers; the fingernails were like crystal. Cutting them down and intentionally mailing them to you, my dear; for the time being

¹⁶ The translation is from James Legge. See *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism, Part I*, trans. James Legge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1899), p. 466.

¹⁷ Chao Cai and her neighbor, Wen Mao, secretly pledged to marry when they were young. Until they grew up, Wen Mao often sent poetry to express his love and Chao Cai once gave him several lotus seeds in return. One of the seeds dropped into a water basin, and it blossomed as two lotuses sharing one stem, which is a symbol of couple in love. Wen informed Chao about the matter of the lotus blossom and took the chance to consummate with Chao Cai. Later, Chao's mother learned about the circumstance and believed that they were greatly compatible. Chao's mother therefore married Chao Cai to Wen Mao. There are twenty-two poems by Chao Cai collected in the *Quan Tangshi* 全唐詩. Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 also recorded Wen Mao and Chao Cai's story in his *Qingshi* 情史. Feng commented that in Master Jia's *Shuolin* 說林, there was a story about Chen Feng 陳豐 and her neighbor, Ge Bo 葛勃, with the same plot of the lotus blossoms. Feng Menglong then speculated that the tale about Chao was an imitation of Chen Feng's story. See Peng Dingqiu, ed., *Quan Tangshi*, pp. 8999–9001; Feng Menglong, *Qingshi*, in *Feng Menglong Quanji* 馮夢龍全集, ed. Wei Tongxian 魏同賢 (Nanjing Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), vol. 7, pp. 84–86.

take them as we walk hand-in-hand” 明窗弄玉指，指甲如水晶。剪之特寄郎，聊當攜手行。

Later a Song-dynasty *chuanqi* 傳奇 tale titled “Wang Youyu ji” 王幼玉記 by Liu Shiyin 柳師尹(?) records that the famous courtesan Wang Youyu left her tresses and nails for her lover, Liu Fu 柳富, as mementos. In her last words, she says that he used to love her hands, feet, eyebrows, and eyes, but they could not be attached in a piece of mail. Now she has cut off a skein of hair and some fingernails for him.¹⁸ Influenced by this,¹⁹ in her renowned novel, *Honglouloumeng* 紅樓夢 (*The Dream of Red Chamber*), Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (?–c. 1763) depicts Qingwen 晴雯, while on the verge of dying, “reaching for a pair of scissors to cut off the tapering nails of the last two fingers of her left hand. Then, under the quilt, she took off her worn red silk bodice and gave this to him together with the nails,” saying to Baoyu 寶玉, “Take these keepsakes to remind yourself of me.”²⁰ This astonishing description clearly suggests Qingwen’s admiration for him. Standing on her predecessors’ shoulders, through her humor, Xi Peilan transforms the tale to express not only conjugal affection but also physical closeness and jealousy. More importantly, Sun Yuanxiang’s reply allows readers to observe the interesting dialogue involved. Sun’s poem written in response reads:

內人指甲 “The Fingernails of My Wife”
 不愛勻黃不染丹，生來偏喜近豪端
 Neither likes polishing yellow nor coloring red onto fingernails;
 My wife is by nature particularly fond of getting close to tips of trivial things.

¹⁸ This tale is in *Qingsuo gaoyi* 青瑣高議, comp. Liu Fu 劉斧 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji shubanshe, 1983), *qianji* 前集, pp. 95–98.

¹⁹ Wu Shichang 吳世昌, “Du Honglouloumeng bashihui jiaoben” 讀紅樓夢八十回校本, *Wenxue yichan* 文學遺產 (1993.5): 97–100.

²⁰ Cao Xueqin, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), vol. 3, p. 1687.

只因久慣拈花後，落剪依然氣似蘭
 Only because after wanting to nip flowers for long,
 Falling from scissors, fingernails still diffused an aroma like that of orchid
 blossoms.

In his replying piece, Sun Yuanxiang chooses to place more emphasis on Xi Peilan's personal habits and preferences than on detailed descriptions of the nails. From a husband's viewpoint, Xi Peilan has her own personality and preferences. He starts by discussing her predilection for keeping her fingernails plain. Her inclination to be natural sets the basic tone of this poem and links their first and second halves. Also, another preference of hers, a fondness for leaving her nails long and plucking flowers, is revealed through his attentive observation. This shows that she is not the only one who likes trivial stuff; so does he. It is easy to imagine the floral fragrance accompanying her body parts being not restricted solely to her nails. Her frequent proximity to blossoms results in a constant aroma seeming to attach itself to her body, and resonates with Sun's verse on Xi's fondness for poems on plum blossoms, which I discuss in the next section. The scent also becomes like a natural decoration which fits her stylistic naturalism, as well.

The desire for possession that Xi Peilan expresses in a playful tone gives her a stronger personality than the seemingly single dimension of a virtuous spouse who is not distinguished in any particular way from other talented gentry wives. Interestingly, although the desire to possess a man, even her husband, challenges conventional wifely virtues, it also showcases the close relationship between Sun and Xi. However, the worry that Xi Peilan suggests in her poem is not merely suspicion; her husband has been maintaining intimate relationships with courtesans, a fact that will be explored later in this chapter. To placate her anxiety, Sun Yuanxiang indirectly articulates his fondness for

Xi Peilan in his reply. In addition, when receiving his *jinshi* degree in Beijing, he sends a verse home to Peilan to assure her of his loyalty. His poem reads as follows:

禮部宴飲歸作家書寄內 “Back from the Banquet Held by the Ministry of Rites for the Newly-Passed *Jinshi* Degree Holders, I Composed a Letter Home Addressed to My Wife”

陌上年年盼兩眸，今番應得放眉頭

By the path, every year your eyes are expecting;
This time you should be able to loosen your eyebrows.

無由割肉誇聞喜，且免抽稿賦遣愁

There is no reason to cut meat to show off the glad news you heard;
You are going to dispense with pulling out the drafts to write about dissipating sorrow instead.

噉餅尚勝牙雪脆，看花敢逞眼風流

My teeth were still competent to eat snow-white and crispy pastries;
I was daring to indulge in satisfying the desire of my eyes to see glamorous flowers.

寄君一語君應笑，並未醉眠何處樓

Sending you a sentence, I presumed that you should laugh;
I had not drunkenly slept in a tower somewhere.²¹

Humor is the basic tone throughout this poem sent to his wife. Sun Yuanxiang begins the poem with his compassion for her long wait and sorrowful disappointment in the past. According to Sun’s vivid descriptions, this clearly shows that striving for a positive result in the civil service exam not only placed a heavy burden on a man’s shoulders but also was the cause of both great hope and worry for his wife. Also, as the previous chapter has shown, taking the civil service exam is like fighting a long war. In the second couplet, the author uses a humorous allusion that indicates spousal closeness. He states that he has no reason to imitate Dongfang Shuo 東方朔,²² who cut off from a piece of meat bestowed

²¹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Libu yanyin gui zuo jia shu jinei,” in *Tianzhen’ge ji*, p. 193.

²² Dongfang Shuo’s biography records that on a sweltering summer day, the emperor bestowed some meat on his officials. Nonetheless, the functionary in charge of dividing meat was late. While waiting, Dongfang Shuo said to his colleague that he should go home early on this kind of hot day; he then drew his sword to slice off a piece of meat and left. The functionary reported to the sovereign, who commanded Dongfang to criticize himself for this. Shuo expressed his “regret,” saying, “Dongfang Shuo, how rude you are! You received the bestowal without waiting for the decree. How heroic you are that you unsheathed your sword

by the emperor a slice for his wife, to show that they were on good terms in public. Indeed, their intimacy and constant and deep concern for each other are rather obviously displayed. He is not only certain about Xi Peilan's acquaintance with the meaning of his poetic connotations, but also teases his wife, saying that it is needless to boast about the delight of hearing great news. Meanwhile, Sun also, by negating the act of slicing meat at the banquet, presents himself as a man who keeps a low profile, which resonates with the joke he makes to his wife. In addition, in the second line of this couplet, Sun Yuanxiang highlights Xi Peilan's identity as a poet and the comforting work she had composed on the occasion of his previous failure, as discussed in chapter 2. In the third couplet, the author turns to describing his current situation at the banquet in a playful tone. He uses a joke to both tell his wife not to worry about his health and celebrate the beauty and pleasure of the feast. Moreover, by juxtaposing the eating of pastries and the appreciation of flowers, Sun makes it sound like he is telling Peilan about his health in order to relieve her of worry. In this way, he lessens the apparent seriousness of being dissolute. More significantly, he assures his wife of his self-control as he is only watching and not touching. The poet finishes this verse in a humorous way, while also restating his commitment to his wife and his marriage. After the congratulatory banquet, presumably, he could have gone to brothels as he suggests. Nevertheless, he chooses to return to his place of lodging to compose a poem as an answer to Xi Peilan's encouraging poems in the past and to declare his loyalty, which may evoke in Xi Peilan complicated emotions.

to cut off the meat! How incorruptible you are that you did not take a large portion! How benevolent you are that you brought the meat back for your wife!" The emperor laughed and said that he required him to blame himself, but surprisingly he on the contrary praised himself. Then, the emperor granted him a large amount of alcohol and meat for his wife. Holding the meat in the bosom (懷肉) became a term to indicate that one man does not forget his wife while enjoying a feast. See Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), "Dongdang Shuo zhuan" 東方朔傳, in *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), p. 2846.

The laugh that his wife utters after reading his poem consists of banter as well as gratification. Their closeness therefore is demonstrated not only in teasing but also in his trust it is acceptable to bring up the topic before his wife, even in public.

Festivals and Birthdays

Poetic compositions penned on particular occasions, such as festivals and birthdays, are often a stage for playfully using related allusions to express affection in conjugal relationships. At the same time, through poetic exchanges on the occasions of the New Year or birthdays, companionate couples would share expectations and imaginations of their future, communicating their philosophies of life. Additionally, when the partner fell into depression on an otherwise joyful situations, the spouse would offer mental support and encouragement through poetic exchanges.

Many festivals, whose major function was to occasion family gatherings, would arouse poets' affection towards family members. Xu Can composed a poem around the Dragon Boat Festival; in the closing couplet, she employs one of the customs of the festival to express her affection and care for her husband, who is addressed in a joking tone. It says, "Since I treasure you so much, I love to nip the threads of longevity,²³ tying in advance a colorful silk onto the ill Xiangru's wrist²⁴ 珍重好拈長命縷, 綵絲先繫病相如. Traditionally, Chinese people believed that the Dragon Boat Festival was a time when malignant animals and ailments were rampant due to the high temperatures of

²³ According to Ying Shao's 應劭 (fl. 189) *Fengsutong* 風俗通, one of the customs on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival was tying five-color silk threads on one's arms, especially for children, in order to avoid the disasters of war, ghosts, and ailments. The silk threads were called "thread praying for longevity." See Yang Shao, *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu* 風俗通義校注, annot. Wang Liqi 王利器 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), pp. 605–606.

²⁴ Xu Can, "Chongwi qian sanri xizeng Su'an," in *Zhuozhengyuan shiji*, p. 571.

summer. People therefore came up with various ways to avoid getting ill. Among them were threads of longevity made from five-color silk; people would tie these threads on their arms or wrists to prevent sickness. In light of this, Xu Can poked fun at her husband as a sick Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179 B.C.E–117 B.C.E),²⁵ using an allusion commonly used in the context of conjugal couples and illness, since Sima married a woman poet and also suffered from chronic diabetes. Accordingly, by drawing an analogy between her husband and Sima Xiangru, Xu is implicitly paralleling herself to Xiangru's talented wife, Zhuo Wenjun 卓文君, whom he saw as his perfect match as well as the one would take care of the illness of Xiangru. Based on this, the poetess next states that she will tie the threads in advance for his protection. Xu Can implicitly reveals her hope that he can be as healthy as the willow. Her care for Chen Zhilin was clearly displayed through her teasing and fondness for making threads to be used in praying for longevity and to express her feeling of cherishing him dearly. In addition, the poetess is making a homonymic pun: binding silk (si 絲) onto her husband is also a way of saying that she is thinking affectionately about (si 思) him.

Apart from the Dragon Boat Festival, which is not a typical occasion for the expression of affection, the Double Seventh Festival, which originated from a romantic love story, provided a more common occasion for mentioning one's yearning for love and beloved ones publicly without transgressing poetic etiquette. In his collection, Sun

²⁵ Sima Xiangru, a famous rhapsodic writer in the Western Han Dynasty, was known for suffering from diabetes. One day, after he had resigned from his post owing to his illness and was staying in Linqiong as a guest of the magistrate, he was invited to a banquet held by Zhuo Wangsun 卓王孫, a local magnate. Wangsun had a newly widowed daughter, Zhuo Wenjun, who was fond of music; while Xiangru was playing the zither at the banquet, Wenjun was peeping behind a door, and found that she really adored him. Xiangru also knew that Wenjun was pretty, and he therefore played an alluring song to flirt with her. They had feeling for each other. Xiangru then heavily bribed Wenjun's maid and they eloped back to Xiangru's hometown. See Sima Qian, *Shiji*, p. 3000.

Yuanxiang composes seven poems about the festival;²⁶ in one of them, he makes a contrast between the Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden, to joke with his wife and underscore the happiness they enjoy together. The poem reads:

七夕同內人 “On the Double Seventh Festival I Composed a Poem with the Same Title as One by My Wife”
 晚霞斜駐玉顏紅，一角秋山落鏡中
 The sunset glow slantingly stopped on a jaded face became rosy;
 A reflection of a corner of the autumn hills falling into the mirror.
 小飲不辭蓮子盞，嫩涼剛襲藕花風
 Drinking lightly, we do not decline the wine bowl that looks like a seedpod of lotus;
 A mild chill from the wind just touches the lotus blossoms.
 心期何待盟初月，笑語還防送遠空
 It is needless to wait to vow our wishes to the just-rising moon;
 We still need to prevent conversations with laughter from being transmitted to the remote heaven.
 知否雙星應妒汝，藥爐經卷伴梁鴻
 Do you know whether the two stars should envy you?
 With stoves for herbal medicines and scrolls of classics, you accompany Liang Hong.²⁷

In the first couplet, Sun Yuanxiang places his focus on an inner space. He portrays a quiescent state in the inner chamber: the slanting sunset, like the best cosmetics, glows a crimson color that reflects onto his wife’s beautiful and delicate face. At the same time, in her dressing mirror, the autumn hills are seen falling into the reflection. In this way, the outside scenery is incorporated into the indoor room. The poet then adds more active scenes, and moves the focus from inside to outside. The poet uses the connotation of lotus in the husband and wife relationship to hint at his tender love (憐) when they are

²⁶ Sun Yuanxiang, “Qixi ci” 七夕詞 “Qixi ni Qianniu zeng Zhinü” 七夕擬牽牛贈織女, “Ni Zhinü da” 擬織女答, “Qixi tong neiren” 七夕同內人, “Wanzhi qixi: shiri liqiu” 灣止七夕: 是日立秋, “Run qixi tong neiren” 閏七夕同內人, “Bu suan zi man: qixi tong Zikan, Ziliang, Shao Lanfeng Guangquan xi liang ge’ nü deng xiao shiwu” 卜算子慢: 七夕同子侃子梁邵蘭風廣銓攜兩歌女登小石屋, in *Tianzhen’ge ji*, pp. 96, 113, 263, 271, 325, 416.

²⁷ Sun Yuanxiang, “Qixi tong neiren,” in *Tianzhen’ge ji*, p. 263.

together (偶). The author further highlights their harmonious and delightful interactions. He believes that they have no need to pledge or pray to the moon since they each already love their spouse deeply. The two immortals, famous for their romantic love, would be jealous of Sun and Xi's happiness if their joyous conversations were transmitted to Heaven. Accordingly, the poet writes a humorous ending that shows him teasing his wife by saying that she should be satisfied with the current situation. Compared with the legendary couple, who can only meet with each other once a year, they are able to be together in daily life sharing the experiences of illness, poverty, and reading together.

In addition to the Double Seventh Festival, the Chinese New Year, the festival of the most significance in Chinese culture and a time for family gatherings as well as expressing hopes for the coming year, becomes a perfect chance to express affection as well as plans for the future between husband and wife. The lunar New Year's Eve plays an especially important role in Yihui's and Taiqing's collected poetic works, which follow a chronological order. Interestingly, both of them emphasize their identities as poets and poetic friends. Gu Taiqing wrote a quatrain to conclude her thirty-seventh year;²⁸ in retrospect, all bitterness and happiness in the first half of her lifetime now seems to have passed in toil as well as haste. However, after a spring breeze that blows for thousands of miles, the land experiences a crucial turn. The spring wind here is a metaphor for her romantic relationship with Yihui, which totally changed her life. Following this, the poetess shifts the focus to the present moment: "Cutting off flowers in the hall²⁹ with a

²⁸ Gu Taiqing, "Chuxi jian tanghua ji songzhi chaping xicheng yi jieju" 除夕剪唐花及松枝插瓶戲成一截句, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 140.

²⁹ "Tanghua" 唐花 means flowers planted in a heated indoor space in order to sell them in the winter. According to *Yanjing suishi ji* 燕京歲時記, flower sellers use this name for flowers nourished by heating through fire. When it comes to the New Year, people often use this kind of flowers as gifts to friends. The gorgeousness of flowers from different parts of spring such as peonies and cumquats were all gathered in

smile, facing my husband, I said that I had again repaid the poetic debts of this whole year” 笑剪唐花相對語，一年詩債又償還。³⁰ On an occasion of gathering, celebration, and gaiety, the author, as hostess, is fulfilling her womanly duty of making the new-year decorations, while simultaneously she mentions her other identity as poet to her beloved and “creditor.” She reveals her prolific poetic activity. She not only has frequent poetic communications with her female poetic friends; she also owes her husband many poems. For example, in the short preface to one *ci*, she states that Yihui bought an antique jade flute, and they both agreed to compose a poem on it. After her husband completed his, she decided that, since there was now already a marvelous piece, she would not pen another long *ci*. Instead, she composed a sixteen-word *xiaoling* 小令 to meet her obligation, and provided it as the material of a joke.³¹ This clearly attests to the frequent literary “competition” and “poetic debts” exchanged within literary couples. By playfully twisting the custom that one should clear all debts before the New Year, she highlights her accomplishments in poetic composition. The smile is therefore not solely about the coming festival, but also about her satisfaction that Yihui can totally understand her delight.

Interestingly, Taiqing ingeniously uses the same metaphor of poetic debts at the beginning of his next poem, written on the first day of the New Year, and forming a perfect linkage within the New Year Season. It also implicitly corresponds to the opening

one hall, which was thus called “tanghua” 堂花 (flowers placed in the hall). See Fucha Dunchong 富察敦崇 (1855–1922), *Yanjing suishi ji* (Beijing: Beijing giji chubanshe, 1981), p. 97.

³⁰ Gu Taiqing, “Chuxi jian tanghua ji songzhi chaping xicheng yi jieju,” in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 140.

³¹ Gu Taiqing, “To the tune: Cangqu yao: fuzi yi shijin yide gu yudi yizhi, qie yue tongyong. xiangcheng ‘cuiyu yin’ yique, lizhu yide, bugan fu zuo manci, jinfu shiliuziling, liaobo yixiao ceze” 蒼梧謠：夫子以十金易得古玉笛一枝，且約同詠。先成“翠羽吟”一闕，驪珠已得，不敢復作慢詞，謹賦十六字令，聊博一笑塞責，in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 431.

line which says, “Already repaid my poetic debts of last year; again, the fate of pen and ink this year continues” 去年詩債已償還，又續今年筆墨緣。³² Gu Taiqing repeatedly stresses her attachments and efforts in her literary activities, and makes improvements in her poetic skills one of her goals for the New Year. Apart from the identity of poet, she concludes the verse by constructing her image as a virtuous wife expressing concerns about the health of her mother-in-law and the joy that she feels at her children being around. The absence of her husband in her new-year wishes also shows the strong self-censorship reflecting the gender etiquette of poetic composition.

On the New Year’s Eve of the previous year, Yihui wrote a poem that he presented to Taiqing and that mentions a similar idea. That year, they had lost their youngest son, who was only one year old, and had been born on the same day as Taiqing. To comfort himself, Yihui starts his piece with Buddhist ideas that the physical body, which could be a reference to himself, his late son, or both, is like an illusion in the world. With a sense that one’s allotment ought to depend solely on fate, his drifting life terminated in the year of jiawu 甲午. In the same vein, it contains double meanings: first, it indicates that his son ended his life that year, when the Jiawu year was also finishing. In the latter part of the verse, the author turns to hopes for the coming year, indicating that literary creation will still hold a privileged position. He writes, “Poetic scrolls tomorrow will write down the year of yiwei 乙未; with you, we together compose poetry on a good spring day” 詩卷明朝書乙未，與君同賦好春天。³³ Facing the extreme grief of his loss, poetry plays the role of soothing and providing him with future hope. Meanwhile, in his depiction,

³² Gu Taiqing, “Bingshen yuandan” 丙申元旦, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 141.

³³ Aixinhueluo Yihui, “Chuxi zuo shi Taiqing” 除夕作示太清, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 571.

poetry ties the couple together; they not only share the same interests but also enjoy the same nice spring scenery. Taiqing's company is imagined as somehow relieving his sorrow while also, through his poetry, consoling his wife in her bereavement. In light of this, it clearly echoes Taiqing's line about the accumulation of poetic debts.

The Lantern Festival, on the very last day of the holidays of the lunar New Year, not only involved grand celebrations, but also served as an opportunity for unmarried girls to step out of their boudoirs to meet men other than their relatives. For married couples, it was a day to rejoice and express the happiness of being together. For this reason, the holiday originally contained romantic connotations; and the date was especially meaningful to Yihui and Taiqing since Yihui's birthday was the day after the Lantern Festival. Because of this, both Gu Taiqing and Yihui often wrote lyrics about it.

Taiqing's work reads:

風入松：春燈次夫子韻二首（其二） To the tune: "Winds Enter Pine Woods: Composing Two Pieces on the Decorated Lantern of the Spring Festival following My Husbands' Rhymes (second one)"

華堂春暖設春筵，燈彩月華天。

In warm spring in the magnificent hall, we prepared a spring banquet;
the luster of lanterns shone with moonlight from the sky.

上元南極開芳宴，宴群仙，香裊雲盤。

On the lantern festival, the star of the South Pole³⁴ held a fragrant feast for the dining of groups of immortals.

Incense swirled around the plate held by a bronze giant towering into the clouds³⁵.

彩服庭前兒女，貂裘門下衣冠。

In the yard, children wore colorful clothes; guests wore mink robes as attire.

春王寶籙注延年，松柏豈云殘。

The king of spring³⁶ in precious secret records is destined to prolong your life;

³⁴ "Nanji" is a shortened form of *nanji laoren* 南極老人, which refers to a bright star in the constellation of *tianlang* 天狼. This star was regarded as the deity in charge of longevity. This term was usually used to praise one who was celebrating his or her birthday.

³⁵ The emperor Wu of the Han dynasty built a giant bronze statue holding a plate to collect dewdrops to make medicine for longevity.

³⁶ In the *Chunqiu* 春秋 uses this term to denote the first month of the lunar year.

how could pine and cypress be called deficient?

喜君與我生同歲，祝三多，樂勝從前。

Glad you and I were born in the same year.

I wish you owned three things³⁷ plentifully.

Your joy surpasses that of before.

好景何如今夕，新詩載入芸編。十六日夫子誕日。

How could nice scenery be compared with tonight?

Recorded new poems into fragrant scented books³⁸. *The sixteenth of the month was my husband's birthday.*³⁹

In the first piece, Gu Taiqing describes the jolly and lively scene of watching the lantern festival outside. In the second verse, she turns the focus back into a birthday banquet held in the inner space. The poetess delineates a gorgeous, warm, and, convivial atmosphere as if they were in Heaven. In this feast, the idea of a fragrant banquet suggests the conjugal closeness—a fragrant banquet being not only a typical part of a lantern festival, but also one of the motifs of pictorial works that usually portrayed husbands and wives sitting opposite each other drinking or watching dramas together to express their close matrimonial relationship.⁴⁰ In light of this, it is reasonable to imagine that Taiqing and Yihui sat together witnessing and chatting with the other noble guests celebrating. In addition, on the occasion of her husband's birthday, Gu Taiqing uses symbols of vitality, longevity, and integrity in a rhetorical questioning aimed at encouraging her beloved and

³⁷ The “three things” refers to longevity, fortune, and descendants.

³⁸ “Yun” is a kind of herb able to expel bookworms. People usually put it in books. “Yunbian” therefore became an appellation for books.

³⁹ Gu Taiqing, “Fengrusong: chundeng ci fuzi yun ershou (qi'er),” *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 553.

⁴⁰ This was a common activity in the Tang dynasty. Lu Zhaolin 盧照鄰 (ca. 636–ca. 695) in his poem entitled “Shiwuye guandeng” 十五夜觀燈 mentions “Holding the fragrant banquet in the neighborhood of weaving fine silks; lavish lanterns are more splendid than in previous years” 錦里開芳宴，蘭缸豔早年. It also was a theme of pictographs in tombs; it often portrays a couple sitting opposite each other drinking or watching dramas. Luo Ye 羅燁 in his miscellaneous notes states that scholar Zhang often holds fragrant banquets in his mansion to express the affections between husband and wife. See Lu Zhaolin, “Shiwuye guandeng,” in Peng Dingqiu, ed., *Quan Tangshi*, p. 523; Luo Ye, *Zuiweng tanlu* 醉翁談錄 (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1957), p. 102.

reinforcing her belief in his long life; this shows that as a close partner, the author wholeheartedly wished her husband longevity and happiness.

More importantly, echoing Yihui's piece, she takes an optimistic stance in endeavoring to cheer him up. Yihui in his lyrics recalled his experience of past galas in the palace filled with festive parties and fireworks. However, he suddenly fell into depression; not only have the celebratory lanterns fallen into desuetude, but he also "resigned from the court on account of sickness for three years" 謝病已三年.⁴¹ He then laments the drastic differences between the officials who are used to attending the celebration and the situation at the court. "Half of the senior officials are withered and destroyed. Every time I meet people, I ask them about matters at the court. Nonetheless, hearsay has it that the situation is unlike that of before" 老宿半凋殘. 逢人每問朝廷事, 但傳聞不似從前.⁴² Facing the decline and changes in his career, Yihui then choose to, "under the lamp, manage my incomplete collected works by myself" 挑燈自理殘編.⁴³ Taiqing hence comforts her husband by expressing her strong belief that he will enjoy longevity as well as robustness, like pine and cypress trees. Additionally, she conveys more contentment from being the same age as him and sharing the same emotions. Meanwhile, to give solace to her husband, who is frustrated by the obstructions of his career and suffered from various ailments, the poetess reminds him of happiness with family and friends and of the pleasure of literary creation being able to assuage his loss. Moreover, Taiqing tries to exhort Yihui to treasure the present pleasant moment by virtue

⁴¹ Aixinjueluo Yihui, To the tune: "Fengrusong: chundeng" 風入松: 春燈, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 690.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

of poetic composition. At the same time, to respond her husband, Gu encouraged him to find the meaning of his life in continuing to write new poems instead of editing old ones.

Clearly, poetry played an important role in their spousal relationship. It served as a vehicle not only for recording their intimacy but also for bringing comfort to her husband. Describing the writing of a poem in verse creates an interesting effect; it seems like their harmonious relationship is receiving a double recording. In addition, through the format of matching rhymes, the poetess could cheer him up line by line. She assumes the responsibility of a companionate partner and at the same time manifests her own literary talents.

Apart from these particular festivals, there was also a general but individual event, namely birthdays, that provided an occasion for husbands and wives to review and celebrate the time they spend together. In addition, this was an occasion to express admiration to their spouses and voice their expectations for the future. Among the four couples, Yihui and Gu Taiqing have many extant poetic exchanges in their collected works. Since they were of the same age and their birthdays both fell within the period of the spring festival, birthdays thus became an occasion they would frequently write about. The following verse shows Gu Taiqing matching rhymes with Yihui on his thirty-fifth birthday:

癸巳正月十六日次夫子生日原韻 “On the Sixteenth Day of the First Month of the *Guisi* Year, I Composed Another Poem Following with the Same Rhyme Words Used in the Poem My Husband Wrote on his Birthday”⁴⁴

同經三十五番春，百歲光陰賸幾分

We together have experienced thirty-five times the rotation of springs;
how much time is left out of one hundred years?

變化人情觀逝水，感懷詩句集停雲 時夫子集陶句得詩百餘首為一集

⁴⁴ Gu Taiqing, “Guisi zhengyue shiliuri ci fuzi shengri yuanyun” 癸巳正月十六日次夫子生日原韻, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 382.

Observing the water passing by,⁴⁵ we witness inconstant human emotions;
 You collect poetic lines on feeling sentiments from “Unmoving Clouds.”⁴⁶ *At that time, my husband collected Tao [Yuanming’s poetic] lines. [By rearranging them, he] got more than one hundred verses and compiled them into a collected work.*

空花巧織天孫錦，妙理精書梵世文 夫子善書梵字

Illusionary flowers⁴⁷ are skillfully woven into brocades made by the granddaughter of the heaven,⁴⁸

Excellent and profound principles are delicately written in words from the realm governed by Brahmā. *My husband is conversant in writing Sanskrit characters.*

禪榻鬢絲相結伴，心香一瓣破魔軍

Sitting on the couch for meditation until the hair on the temples whitens like silk, we accompany each other;

Burning petals of incense in the mind⁴⁹ to rout the demonic army⁵⁰.

At the very beginning, the writer directly points out the companionship between them. She considers the fact that they are the same age as meaning that they have jointly experienced thirty-five years, creating the strong sense that they have been spending their whole lives together. The springs refer not only to the real season of their birthdays, which are both in the first month of the lunar year, but also to the golden age that they share together. However, the happiness they enjoy, the birthday occasion indicating their getting older in addition to Yihui’s original line saying that his toilsome life has passed

⁴⁵ The *Analects* records that Confucius used to look at a stream and say that time elapses just like this, not stopping day or night. Afterwards, the term “shishui” came to mean elapsed time. See Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. James Legge (Overland Park: Digireads, 2017), p. 44.

⁴⁶ “Unmoving Clouds” is a series of four tetrasyllabic poems by Tao Yuanming; Tao states that the gist of those poems is longing for his close friends.

⁴⁷ “Konghua” is a Buddhist term meaning illusionary flowering shadows appearing to the eyes of the sick; the illusionary flower was a metaphor of delusion and false appearance.

⁴⁸ “Tiansun” denotes a weaving maid, since according to the *Shiji*, the Weaving Maiden is the granddaughter of a female immortal. “Tiansunjin” literally means brocades made by the Weaving Maiden; it was also used as a simile of gorgeous textiles or delicate literary works.

⁴⁹ Petals here serve as a term for measuring incense since the shape is made to imitate petals of melons; this type of incense was usually used to worship deities and express the piety of the worshippers. “Xinxiang” indicates that when one is devoted wholeheartedly, it is as if he were burning incense to worship Buddhist deities.

⁵⁰ In Buddhism, before Buddha accomplished his utmost self-cultivation, the demonic king, Māra, came to harass him and the troops that the king led were called the demonic army. Later, this phrase referred to the myriad desires and vexations that Māra uses to attack people’s minds. See *Foguang da xidian* 佛光大辭典, ed. Ci Yi 慈怡 (Gaohsiung: Foguang chubanshe, 1988), p. 6887.

the half-way point trigger Taiqing's concern, with all its pathos, for how much time they still have. To resist the change and uncertainty in their lives, the poetess states that they can accompany each other in Buddhist cultivation of the mind during their later years. Interestingly, Taiqing both reveals her understanding of Buddhist philosophy and links their religious practice to their conjugal intimacy. Besides the close connection to romantic love that the image of hair originally has, by placing the two phrases, "binsi" and "jieban," together, the author creates a strong suggestion of their betrothal. Through the knotting of hair, which connotes marriage, they become companions in both real and spiritual life. Meanwhile, by paralleling Buddhist ideas and spousal intimacy, she also creates a subtle tension between the two lines of the last couplet. Buddhism emphasizes the diminution of all emotions and desires; yet, Gu proposes to defend the demonic troops with devotional practices within their close relationship, which ironically suggests a mobilizing of the demonic troops in typical Buddhist thoughts.

Through Taiqing's observations, she provides more details about her husband; reading and transforming Tao Yuanming's poems known for expressions of yearning for friends serves as a remedy for his melancholy. In reading Yihui's works, the poetess overtly expresses her admiration of his talents. In her eyes, he ingeniously weaves emotions into a gorgeous language through his poetic excellence, which is also manifest in successfully linking Tao Yuanming's poetic lines and making into Yihui's own works. Meanwhile, he presents his profound understanding of Buddhism; his knowledge forms the solid basis of their cultivation and enables him to provide her with guidance in her improvements.

Generally, the couple places different emphases on the same birthday occasion. Yihui spends most of the space describing his social life, including the marriage of his descendants, interactions with his colleagues and literary friends, and victory in the warfare in Taiwan. Gu nonetheless shifts her focus onto their spousal intimacy, and religious and literary activities. Their representations in this set of congratulatory poems match the gender stereotypes according to which the male poet displays a life that is richer socially while the poetess is more domestically oriented.

Interestingly, Taiqing alone has congratulatory birthday poems written to her husband, not he to her; this suggests that they are following the prevailing gender protocols between husband and wife. Birthdays offer a legitimate occasion for the poetess to express admiration to her husband, phrased as if she were presenting her poetic works to a more highly ranked person; however, a channel for this does not seem to be opened up for Yihui. Most likely, Yihui understood that due to his status as a prince, he should not write congratulatory poems to a concubine.

As with Gu Taiqing and Yihui, for Chen Yilin and Xu Can, the spouse's birthdays were a perfect occasion for Chen Yilin and Xu Can to express their understanding of the other and wishes for their future. Xu Can composes a piece to congratulate her husband on his sixtieth birthday. Although "sixty" is considered an advanced age and has auspicious connotations, Xu does not spill ink on this notion, but rather emphasizes the attitudes of life. The verse reads:

素庵六十初度 “The Sixtieth Birthday of Su’an”⁵¹
 遊戲塵寰六十秋，幾回榮辱總浮漚
 Roaming in the mundane world for sixty years;

⁵¹ Xu Can, “Su’an liushi chudu,” in *Zhuozhengyuan shiji*, p. 563.

Being glorified and disgraced several times, and the ups and downs are always like foam on water.⁵²

偶耽翰墨仍無著，獨信神仙必可求

Occasionally you indulge yourself in the brush and ink, but still are not obsessed with it;

You solely believe that the way of immortality is achievable.

霜後橘紅懷震澤，月中梅白憶羅浮

After the frost, oranges turning red make me miss Lake Zhen;⁵³

Amid moonlight, plum blossoms whitening allow me to reminisce about Luofu Mountain.⁵⁴

共尋雲際瓊台路，不向崑崙十二樓

Together look for the road to Mount Qiongtai⁵⁵ in the midst of clouds;

Do not go towards the twelve jade towers in Kunlun Mountain.⁵⁶

In her use of “youxi” 遊戲, Xu suggests that Chen’s roaming the world reflects his past experience of journeying from the lower Yangzi delta to Beijing to seek a position at the court, and being exiled twice to Liaoyang 遼陽 and Shengjing 盛京 (present-day Shenyang 瀋陽), respectively. On the other hand, by playing with the double meanings of the term, Xu Can suggests her understanding of his mentality, which ought to be as relaxed as playing games. Xu exhorts her husband not to take everything, particularly fame and success in his career, too seriously and eagerly, since honor and failure are

⁵² This term refers to foam on the water surface. Because of its quality of easily engendering and vanishing, the phrase is used to indicate inconstant things in the world and a short life.

⁵³ “Zhenze” is another name of Lake Tai 太湖; it is located in the present Jiangsu province, which is also the homeland of Xu Can.

⁵⁴ Luofu Mountain is located in the present Guangdong 廣東 province. *Longcheng lu* 龍城錄 records that in the Sui 隋 time, Zhao Shixiong 趙師雄 encountered a young lady at Luofu Mountain. When talking to her, he sensed a strong aroma and found her language elegant. They drank together until intoxicated. When awakening, he lay beneath a huge plum tree. “Luofu” therefore became a widely-used allusion for plum blossoms. See Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), *Longcheng lu, Tang Wudai biji xiaoshuo daguan* 唐五代筆記小說大觀, eds. Ding Rumeng 丁如明 et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000), p. 141.

⁵⁵ The Qiongtai mountain belongs to a part of the Tiantai 天台 mountain chain. These mountains are in the present Zhejiang province, of which Chen Zhilin was a native.

⁵⁶ Traditional legend has it that the Queen Mother of the West resides at Kunlun Mountain and that there are twelve jade towers with dazzling terraces and magnificent halls. Hence, “the twelve towers” denotes the celestial realm where the immortals dwell.

evanescent like bubbles. The vicissitudes in Chen Zhilin's life as an official, including his getting an appointment after passing the *jinsshi* exam, his imprisonment when implicated by his father, the promotions he gradually received after surrendering to the Qing house, and being exiled to the area now called Manchuria or Dongbei 东北, owing to the factional struggle and bribery, evidently attests to the inconstant nature of the bureaucracy. In this light, Chen needs a more playful mood to help him face the severe changes.

Xu Can then turns to ways in which Chen tried to divert himself from depression. She draws a comparison between writing and self-cultivation for the sake of longevity. In her observation, Chen is not obsessed with literary composition, and this means that he cannot find spiritual peace within his literary work. Instead, he has a strong faith that there must be a way for him to become an immortal. Xu thus reveals her husband's his firm attachments and desire for longevity and for power; she thinks he is not sufficiently carefree.

In the third couplet, Xu Can shifts the focus to her own yearnings, triggered by outer scenery, for their former life in Jiangnan, where she and Chen spent lots of sweet time engaging in pastimes like eating oranges and observing plum blossoms. She believes that Chen, too, is longing to return. Nostalgia for the south, which not only refers to their comfortable past but also connotes the destroyed Ming Dynasty, is a conspicuous motif in Xu Can's poetic works. However, in this congratulatory piece, she does not explore her sadness. In the closing couplet, the author proposes a future plan with her husband, imagining the day that they will return to the Jiangnan area from Manchuria. This also refers to her hope of traveling with her husband to various scenic spots. She is also trying

to advise him not to dream about and pursue the illusory immortal world, but to cultivate a life like that of a recluse on a mountain that is also a famous Buddhist sacred locale. In line with this, in another verse⁵⁷ matching a poem written after transcribing the *Jingang jing* 金剛經 (*Vájra Cchedikā Prajñā Pāramitā Sūtra*) by Chen Zhilin, Xu Can states that as she gradually came to understand the essence of the sutra, it enabled her to completely forget her sorrow at being exiled to a remote place. She concludes the poem with a similar idea: “Having only the chance to get close to the three temples at Tianzhu Mountain,⁵⁸ why do you need to visit the ten continents in the immortal world⁵⁹” 但得依三竺，何須訪十洲?⁶⁰ Based on this, Xu Can clearly, would like her husband to engage in religious self-cultivation as well as following the plan of a reclusive life; like Gu Taiqing and Yihui, this cultivation would open a space for Xu Can and Chen Zhilin to strengthen their bonds of intimacy. At the same time, she also expresses her own opinion, which is different from his political judgments and choices.

The piece that Chen Zhilin wrote on Xu Can’s birthday emphasizes the beautiful weather as well as her graceful efforts to capture the joyful atmosphere. For Chen, the birthday serves as a perfect chance to publicly praise his wife, particularly for her physical allure. The lyric reads:

滿庭芳 湘蘋壽 To the tune: “Garden Full of Fragrance Xiangping’s [i.e. Xu Can] Birthday”

人在華年，天留韶節，今朝猶是芳春

sThe person is in the age of youth; the heaven keeps the pretty season;⁶¹

⁵⁷ Xu Can, “He Su’an xie *Jin’gangjing* zuo” 和素庵寫金剛經作, in *Zhuozhengyuan shiji*, p. 551.

⁵⁸ The Tianzhu Mountains, located at Hangzhou 杭州 in Zhejiang, includes Upper Tianzhu, Middle Tianzhu, and Lower Tianzhu. These are called the “Three Tianzhu,” which is abbreviated as “sanzhu.”

⁵⁹ In Daoist legend, there are ten continents, where immortals dwell, with spectacular scenery scattered on the sea. Generally, this term also refers to the celestial realm.

⁶⁰ Xu Can, “He Su’an xie *Jin’gangjing* zuo,” in *Zhuozhengyuan shiji*, p. 551.

⁶¹ “Shaojie” is another appellation of spring.

Today is still fragrant spring.
 和風麗旭，庭院靜纖塵
 In a gentle breeze, under the splendid sunlight, in the garden, the fine dust is quiet.
 還道為歡未足，清和月，閏個生辰
 I still thought that taking pleasure is not yet enough;
 In the month of the clear and mild,⁶² adding one more birthday.
 神仙誕，超他一日，先氣得玄真
 One day ahead of an immortal's birthday;
 You in advance obtained the genuineness of mystery.⁶³
 宮花紅勝錦，也曾折取，分映鬢雲
 The red color of palace flowers outmatched the brocade;
 I also ever plucked two flowers to respectively pin them onto your head to set off your dark-cloud-like hair.
 更一枝數實，人說蘭蓀
 Even more, one twig bears several fruits;
 People comment them like orchid and fragrant grass.⁶⁴
 歲歲朱顏常駐，依然是，初嫁丰神
 Wish you every year a gorgeous face that constantly remains,
 keeping your appearance and spirits as like newlywed times.
 新詞好，冰弦自度，時向醉餘聞
 New lyrics are great;
 You compose the melody yourself on strings made by silk produced by ice silkworms.
 I often listen to them after drinking.⁶⁵

The author starts with the splendid outside scenery and comfortable spring weather; the atmosphere in his portrayal is bright, peaceful, and lovely. The description not only

⁶² "Qinghe" is an epithet of the fourth month in the lunar calendar; another explanation indicates that it denotes the second month of the lunar calendar. The term also means the clearness and warmth of weather.

⁶³ In Daoism, the term "xuanzhen" means the essence of the mysterious Way, which originated the whole universe. The term is from the *Laozi*, "These two [i.e. having a name 有名 and having no name 無名], are the same; But diverge in name as they issue forth. Being the same they are called mysteries[.]" 同出而異名同謂之玄 and "As a thing the way is . . . [t]his essence is quite genuine" 道之為物 . . . 其精甚真. This phrase also means simple, plain, and natural. See Laozi, *Tao de ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 5, 26.

⁶⁴ "Lansun" means an outstanding descendant. The allusion comes from the dialogue between Xie An 謝安 and his nephew recorded in *Shishuo xinyu*. "Hsieh An once asked his sons and nephews, 'Young people, after all I have nothing to do with your affairs, yet why am I just now wanting you to become fine people?' No one had anything to say except Hsieh Hsüan, who replied, 'It is just like wanting to have fragrant orchids or jade trees growing by the steps or courtyard, that's all.'" The translation is from Richard Mather, trans., *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, p. 75.

⁶⁵ Chen Zhilin, To the tune: "Mantingfang: Xiangping shou," in *Fuyun ji*, p. 260.

reveals the basic congratulatory, halcyon tone of the birthday occasion; the prosperous scene also suggests a golden age as well as the pretty appearance of his wife. In addition to her appearance, the date of her birthday means that she possesses the qualities of the immortals.⁶⁶ Apart from her innate merits, she possesses some extrinsic honors: Chen received the *jinsi* degree, and the flowers bestowed by the emperor glorify her fame as well as her good-looking, flower-like face. Additionally, through the simile of flowers, he hails her success in having several outstanding children. In the two closing lines, Chen Zhilin shifts the focus onto Xu Can. He lauds her gorgeous appearance, whereby she remains as young as when they first met; the term “suisui” also emphasizes the sense of eternity. He also suggests his accompanying her has enabled him to witness her steadfastness throughout their entire marriage. This quality likely resulted from Chen’s “bias,” which attested to his affection. Not only her beauty but also her talents in literary and musical composition added to her charm. The poet concludes by describing the closeness wherein they would often share new lyrical works in the inner chamber after drinking. Presumably, he is her very first reader and audience, whether of chanting or singing, for his wife’s literary work.

Birthdays and festivals, as occasions for gathering, provided opportunities for literary couples to legitimately voice their mutual affection and appreciation, and offer each other mental comfort. Additionally, the philosophical ideas these couples either shared or disagreed about emerged through their future plans that were drawn out in their poetic discussions. The significance of the poetry rests on its serving as their means of both

⁶⁶ If limited to the female deities believed to be born in the fourth month of the lunar calendar, the immortal Chen refers to could be Bixia yuanjun 碧霞元君, who is the granddaughter of the emperor of Heaven.

communication and entertainment. Birthdays were an occasion to contemplate the meaning of life. The theme of passing their names to later generations often appears as the ultimate goal, and as offering salvation from their current frustration as described in celebratory birthday poems. More importantly, gender inequality could be seen displayed in their literary interactions. On the one hand, the uneven quantity of the festival or birthday celebratory poems between female and male writers shows that the space for expressing conjugal love in congratulatory verses was larger for women, who were typically constructed as susceptible to sentimentality. The imbalance in the numbers of the birthday poems suggests the hierarchy between genders. When male writers sent celebratory poems to their spouses, they would place an emphasis on their wives' beauty and the companionship they offered. The literary talents of gentry women provided a form of entertainment. In their wishes for the future, the women poets focused more on their marital intimacy; this is in line with the division of gender norms such that men would tend to be more outward and women more domestic.

Sickness

This section discusses another matter that was typically confined in domestic space, sickness. In its way, it allowed both husband and wife to publicly express intimacy. Illness is one of the most commonly-appearing themes in Chinese poetry after the Tang dynasty.⁶⁷ As more women writers stepped into the literary arena in the Ming and Qing era, not only male poets but also women writers devoted a great amount of energy to writing poems about their illnesses. As Susan Sontag has shown, illness in literary

⁶⁷ According to a general search of the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 database.

creations is not merely about illness *per se* but also about many other things.⁶⁸ Although Sontag is discussing Victorian England, her findings can also shed light on the Chinese context. According to a survey by Binbin Yang, illness under Chinese male writers' pens is a stage for self-expression, including laments and enjoyments stimulated by the sickness. They lamented their ill fate, unfulfilled ambitions, and waste of time. Yet, at the same time, they described the enjoyments of leisure time obtained from being sick and convalescence, and their enlightenment as a result of religious meditation during the time of their sickness. In addition to the effects on the personal level, illness was also a social occasion literarily as well as physically; illness would elicit poetic exchanges and serve as a legitimate reason for throwing parties with one's friends.⁶⁹

Among these male literati, Bo Juyi 白居易 (772–846) was of great importance in establishing the tradition of poetry on illness. Before Bo's time, in poetry, illness was by and large tightly related to laments and ill fate that were easily evoked while suffering from ailments. In Bo's hand, illness was turned into self-expression and self-representation, adding his autobiographical purpose and his philosophical tranquility afterwards. More importantly, unlike his predecessors, Bo accepted his aging peacefully rather than with lamentation and transformed his illness into a period of ease and leisure. The connection among illness, leisure, and delight later was widely adopted in later generations by both men and women poets.⁷⁰

Gender differences do appear in poems on illness. Women poets would generalize symptoms such as emaciation and weariness, and when they touched upon details of

⁶⁸ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

⁶⁹ Binbin Yang, "Women and the Aesthetics of Illness," pp. 43–88.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–58.

symptoms, they would select elegant metaphors to depict and beatify the messy parts. Rather, they talk more about their perceptions and sensations focused on the surroundings such as the sounds of birds and their own sensitivity to cold. Although the experiences of sickness were simplified in works by women authors, they did consider it a perfect and legitimate occasion to observe and depict their own bodies. In addition, women authors would especially highlight the link between their literary productions and the leisure they enjoyed during a sickness; some of them would even regard poetic creation as a remedy for their illness.⁷¹

As mentioned above, to male poets, illness was an occasion for gatherings of friends. Yet, their wives hardly show up in their poems on illness; when they do talk about their spouses, the wives are usually presented as care-providers. Sun Yuanxiang and Ye Shaoyuan supplement their poems on illness with references to *qing*. In many of Sun's poems on illness, his wife is still represented as the one mainly taking care of her ill husband. Nonetheless, sickness allowed Sun Yuanxiang and Ye Shaoyuan to overtly express their affection and praise for the spouses. In light of this, by presenting their wife as a virtuous woman and expressing their worry for her sickness, Sun and Ye both develop images of themselves as good companions as well as considerate husbands. Furthermore, within the situation of illness, the poems show the complicated intertwining of sickness, poverty, and poetic creation.

Generally speaking, Sun Yuanxiang does not seem to be a healthy person. In addition to the heart disease that made him give up his editor position, he also left approximately fifteen poems whose titles include the word "illness" among his thirty *juan*

⁷¹ Bingbin Yang, "Women and the Aesthetics of Illness," pp. 43–88; Grace Fong, "Writing and Illness," pp. 19–48.

collection. In these poems, he mentions that he suffers from eye problems, dermatitis-like sores, malaria, and common colds. Some of Sun's poems on illness follow the tradition since the Tang that using illness as a metaphor for self-expressions and ambitions. But he also often mentions his wife, as a care and comfort provider, when writing about his ailments and recovery.

While suffering from malaria, Sun wrote a verse to express his gratitude to his caring wife. The poem reads:

病中贈內 “During Illness, I Compose this Verse to Present to My Wife”
 無端小疾遂纏綿，調護全憑德耀賢
 Without any reasons, a minor sickness therefore becomes lingering;
 Taking care of my illness depends entirely on the worthiness of Deyao.⁷²
 氣力已緣齋白盡，心腸還對藥壚煎
 Your strength has already become exhausted owing to the pounding of herbal
 medicines in the mortar;
 Your heart is in addition tortured while facing the medicine mug.
 勸餐細揣甘酸味，著肉能知痛癢先
 Before exhorting me to eat meals, you would meticulously measure out sweet
 and sour savors;
 When practicing moxibustion directly on my skin, you would be able to
 prioritize my pain and itchiness.
 五鼓一家都熟睡，憐卿猶在病床前
 At the fifth drumbeat,⁷³ the entire household soundly sleeps;
 I pity you still remaining in front of the sickbed.⁷⁴

⁷² Deyao was the courtesy name of Meng Guang 孟光(?), who was famous for her lofty virtues and close relationship with her husband, Liang Hong 梁鴻 (?). Meng Guang was not only able to endure poverty but also urged her husband to be a recluse. Additionally, even though they accidentally became debased servants afterwards, Meng still strictly obeyed the principle of decorum that she would hold a small table with dishes above her eyebrows to serve Liang while dining. See Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu*, pp. 2766–68; Ban Zhao 班昭 (ca. 45–ca.117), “Xu Lienüzhuan” 續列女傳, in *Xinkan gu lienüzhuan* 新刊古列女傳, in *Wenxuanlou congshu* 文選樓叢書 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1967), *juan* 18, pp. 18a–b.

⁷³ “Wugu” is as same as “wugeng” 五更 meaning the fifth watch at night. In traditional China, one night was divided into five watches. To inform people of the time, night watchmen would hit gongs or small drums. Wugu is a watch at a time approaching the dawn.

⁷⁴ Sun Yuanxiang, “Bingzhong zengnei,” in *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p. 174.

As this poem is dedicated to his wife, the poet expresses his gratitude to and glorification of her from beginning to end. Sun then overtly praises the endeavors that his wife has been making in nursing his illness by drawing an analogy between her and a virtuous woman celebrated in Chinese history. Through this allusion, Sun Yuanxiang extols not only her attentive care but also her virtue of enduring poverty. From the four scenes focusing on his spouse, not only does her devotion clearly surface but her suffering and consideration are also vividly portrayed. Even though she is exhausted, she still pays attention to the taste of meals; and even though her heart is as if simmering in the mug with those herbal medicines, she still takes her husband's feelings to heart. Additionally, in these detailed descriptions, the poet is shaping his own image as a considerate husband as well; he is able to recognize her hard work and keep in mind a need for gratitude. In the same vein, it is apparent that illness offers him a chance to depict his wife's toiling and appreciate her contributions. Sun Yuanxiang then concludes this poem with the entire house sound asleep, which forms a severe contrast to the solitude of his extremely tired but hard-working wife. Her worthiness then reaches a climax. Moreover, the poet can directly express his affection and tenderness towards her. Their mutual affection converges with the word "lian."

In another long verse titled "Giving This Poem as a Present to My Wife" 贈婦⁷⁵, Sun Yuanxiang elaborates on the meticulous care Xi Peilan offers and again expresses his gratitude for her labor and sacrifice. Through all the details, the poet concludes with their deep love and extols her great virtues. Her tending of him ranges from painstakingly bringing his body temperature back to normal, to making sure of the comfortable

⁷⁵ Sun Yuanxiang, "Zengfu," in *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p. 302.

temperature of his food and liquid medicine, to taking control of the quality of water for cooking and the duration of cooking, to drawing the canopy to keep him warm and covering him to prevent overexposure to the sun. In addition to his physical comfort, she also takes his mood into consideration. Because of her full understanding of his anxiety over their embarrassed financial condition, Xi would not tell him when the bottles and pots for storing food were empty. In order to ease his worry, she even sobs behind her sick husband's back. However, Sun also fully comprehends the burden that Xi bears. First of all, she sells her jewelry to buy expensive medicine. Additionally, she not only has no time to keep tidy her appearance for an entire month, but also largely sacrifices her sleep and her own health, which is revealed by the increase of her white hair.

Through detailed observation, he expresses his compassion for her. Sun claims that they usually gently respect each other and that they never dare to talk about licentious things; Indeed, he writes, “If not owing to being in the condition of dangerous sickness, how could we know that the affection between us are earnest to the extreme” 不緣危病中，焉知情篤絕。 The method that he finds to repay her worthiness is the use of poetic composition to declare her virtue. Obviously, illness offers the couple an opportunity to get close both physically and emotionally; also, poetry serves as both a significant means for shaping her virtuous fame and of a testimony of their affections. Regarding this, he wishes that their love could be as perpetual as if sun and moon were shining on each other; in the meantime, it is recorded in their poetic works, which in principle could circulate forever.

During their convalescence, Sun acts in accordance with the tradition set up by Bo Juyi in enjoying the extra leisure time he gains. At the same time, he rejects the social

aspects of the existing conventions, choosing to step back into the domestic space to build spousal intimacy.

病起 “Rising from Illness”

入簾草色春已殘，睡起窗西日幾竿

The color of grass reflecting into the curtain hinted that the spring is already approaching an end;

Got up from sleep; the sun shining on the west window has climbed up to the height of many poles.

緩緩幽尋疑徑滑，亭亭小立覺風寒

In a leisurely manner seeking for a secluded spot, I suspected that the path is slippery;

I stood alone temporarily and felt that the wind was chilly.

客知叔夜交遊懶，婢伺康成喜怒難

The guests understood that Shuye was tired of socializing;⁷⁶

The maids had a hard time serving Kangcheng either in his happiness or anger.⁷⁷

賴有閨房如學舍，一編橫放兩人看

Relying on having the inner chamber similar to a school;

A book placed horizontally for two people to read.⁷⁸

As Grace Fong has suggested, the title, “Bingqi,” indicates that the author is in a state of convalescence;⁷⁹ from which he is able to get out of bed and even go out of his room.

Sun Yuanxiang begins this poem in a conventional way by pointing out the lateness in time, whereby his health condition is implied; owing to his debility, he has wasted

⁷⁶ Shuye refers to Xi Kang 嵇康 (223–63), who was famous for his eccentric conduct and steadfast resolution to be a recluse. He confessed that he was too lazy to take a bath or go to the lavatory in his renowned letter breaking off a relationship with a good friend who recommend him to be an official. Additionally, when the contemporary elite Zhong Hui 鍾會 (225–64) paid him a visit, Xi Kang did not even talk to Zhong. See Liu Yiqing, *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏, annot. Yu Jiayi 余嘉錫 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), pp. 638–40.

⁷⁷ Kangcheng was the courtesy name of Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200). According to the *Shishuo xinyu*, even serving maids in the Zheng household were all literate and familiar with the Classics. “Once while Hsüan is being waited on by a female slave. She failed to satisfy his wishes. He was on the point of flogging her, when she began making excuses for herself. In a rage, Hsüan had her dragged through the mire. A moment later another female slave came by and asked in the words of the Song, *Shih-wei*, ‘What are you doing in the mire?’ She replied, from the Song, *Po-chou*, ‘I went to him and pled my cause, but there met only with his ire.’” The translation is from Richard Mather, trans., *Shih-shuo hsin-yu*, p. 99.

⁷⁸ Sun Yuanxiang, “Bingqi,” in *Tianzhen ’ge ji*, p. 5.

⁷⁹ Grace Fong, “Writing and Illness,” p. 26.

precious time on his sickbed resting. Meanwhile, the second line also suggests that he does not need to follow the usual schedule of getting up early and going to work. Due to having slept a long time, his sense of time is confused. In the second couplet, the poet suggests his recuperating state by his physical sensations in relation to the outer world, with slow and unsteady steps and sensitivity to chill. In the following couplet, the poet makes two allusions that manifest his strong anti-social tendencies, which set him in opposition to his predecessors, and his testiness owing to illness. From this perspective, readers can then envision another kind of hardship that his wife, as his main care provider, has to undergo and bear. In this ending couplet, Sun Yuanxiang makes the inward gesture of returning to the inner chamber and associates his leisure time with his literary activities as well as his close relationship with his wife. The vivid portrayal enables readers to imagine the closeness, talks, and smiles between them; also, as a companionate couple, their shared interests in reading and literary works are exhibited.

In the following poem, Sun Yuanxiang reveals the source of his weakness and illness and narrates how Xi Peilan has warmly encouraged him:

新春臥病 “Lying Ill on the New Year”

自恨蓮花藕作胎，生前帶得性靈來

I personally regret that roots of a lotus made up me while as a fetus;
Bringing nature and sensibility that come to the earth before birth.

情絲亂處成魔障，心血枯時近鬼才

The spot where threads of affection are in disorder becomes obstacles set by devils;

When my painstaking efforts are depleted, my situation is close to the demonic talent.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Li Ho 李賀 (790–816) was a renowned poet in the Tang dynasty. He was weak and prone to sickness. Li would ride a donkey wandering around while writing poems; once he got an idea, he would sketch them down and throw papers into a sack. After returning home, he would revise them into complete poems and then throw into another sack. His mother used to say that only if he vomits his heart out, would his son stop. Since Li’s poetic style is quite strange and exceptional, he was later called as a poetic wizard. See Li Shangyin, “Li Ho xiaozhuan” 李賀小傳, in Li Shangyin, *Fan ’nan wenji xiangzhu* 樊南文集詳註, annot. Feng Hao (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), *juan* 8, pp. 16b–18a.

[some lines omitted]

山妻笑折早梅新，勸我愁顏一展顰

My mountain wife newly plucks early plum blossoms with a smile;
She exhorts me to completely release the frown on my sorrowful face.

但看此花能耐冷，定知夫子豈長貧

Only see this flower able to endure coldness,
I firmly know how you, my husband, could be in lengthy poverty.

一年暫息無多日，四海堪傳有幾人

There are not so many days on which you are able to attain temporary rest in a year;

How many people would own the fame which can be spread to the four seas?⁸¹

聽到同心溫語慰，相如寒壁頓生春

Hearing the one who has the same heart comforting with tender words,
Inside of Xiangru's poor walls, suddenly grows with the warmth of springtime.⁸²

In the opening three lines of this series of poems, Sun Yuanxiang plays with Buddhist ideas and a poetic theory that he firmly advocates, and in doing this, he creates an interesting tension between the gesture that he makes in poetic lines and his actual stance. The author begins this poem with the reason that he is liable to sickness. He appropriates the Buddhist metaphor of a Buddha nature and the talents of enlightenment as having already been contained in a foetal state, like seeds contained in the roots of a lotus, through replacing the Buddhist notions with *xingling* (native spirituality and sensibility) as well as *qing*, which actually needs to be reduced to zero in Buddhist cultivation. Also, *xingling* and *qing* are the essences of the poetic idea that he advocates. Sun Yuanxiang, as the champion of Yuan Mei's disciples, too, evinces that poetry writing should be based on one's natural sensibilities and emotions. They constitute his poetic talents, yet they are at the same time identified as causes of his illness and congenital weakness. Interestingly

⁸¹ The term "sikai" (the four seas) denotes the whole country or the whole world. This line may refer to the idea that when one passes the *jinshi* level civil service exam, his name will be transmitted around the whole country.

⁸² Sun Yuanxiang, "Xinchun wobing," in *Tianzhen'ge ji*, p. 158.

enough, literary creativity and sickness are here placed in an inverse relation: the more that his health declines owing to the exhaustion of mind and effort, the greater will be his poetic accomplishment. In other word, he implies that the state of being ill for the sake of composition facilitates his creativity. Yet, simultaneously, the more he pushes himself to the limit, the closer he becomes to being a ghost. Ambivalently, the lotus has a strong connection with Buddhism on account of the Buddha being traditionally depicted as seated upon a lotus, and the associations of this with clarity and loftiness. However, in Chinese culture, a lotus in addition has conspicuous romantic connotations, involving homonymic word puns between lotus and tenderness (憐) and between lotus root and pairing (偶). It can therefore be thought that the image of a lotus connotes a mixed feeling between purity and indulgence. Through these love tokens, the poet implies that his nature is also full of *qing*. Furthermore, the threads of affection, which likewise are linked homophonically with thoughts of yearning, are embodied in the threads that appear at broken lotus roots. Additionally, a conspicuous feature of a lotus root is that its fibers will remain joined even though the main part is divided. Sun Yuanxiang uses this connotation, which also usually alludes to a romantic relationship, to indicate the connection between his previous and present lives through their *qing*. Nonetheless, when threads of affection become tightly tangled in his heart, the author turns back to the orthodox Buddhist idea that emotions are impediments hampering further cultivation as well as eventual enlightenment. He is also suggesting that excessive sentiments, which are inevitable when writing, contribute to his illness, too. Interestingly, Sun, on the one hand, applies Buddhist ideas to indicate that *xingling* and *qing* trouble his pursuit of his career, but enhance his understanding of Buddhism, and improve his health. Yet, on the

other hand, he firmly advocates *xingling* and *qing* as the foundation of poetic compositions, and therefore he does not in fact take a negative attitude towards them. He thereby creates an interesting tension among the poetic lines, language, and himself as poet.

Even so, he is still unable to resist being easily aroused by elements of the external environment such as the sound of flute and seasonal changes. The latter particularly evokes the poet's sorrow and frustration at the waste of his time. Failing to build a successful career to support one's family permeates the entire tradition of this subgenre. Additionally, not only does he express his wish to enhance his cultivation of Buddhism in order to reduce his *qing*, but also he reveals his thoughts of leaving the world, though he dismisses them immediately afterwards due to his love for and obligations to his family.

In the concluding poem in this series, Sun Yuanxiang portrays his wife as plain, encouraging, and tender. While she is presented in other poems by Sun as a beautiful immortal, here she is shown as capable of enduring an impoverished life as a recluse without any embellishments. The plum blossom in her hand represents not only Sun's own spirit but also that of his wife. In addition, he records her warm encouragements, believing that her husband will succeed in the future and exhorting him to enjoy his "precious" time while ill to have a good rest.

In the ending couplet, the poet refers to his wife as "tongxin," which literally means having the same heart and intention. Metaphorically, this term connotes the idea of *zhiji* 知己 (the one who truly understands me), which is a non-gendered phrase, and it also has the romantic connotation of two people with mutual affection. In this way, Sun Yuanxiang is saying that Xi Peilan is not merely his *zhiji* who shares the same interests

and is able to completely understand his thoughts and heart, but also the person to whom his romantic feelings are directed. In addition, by choosing this term, he hints that the understanding and affection are in fact reciprocal, as he occupies the same position in Xi Peilan's heart. After hearing her tender and encouraging words, he suddenly feels warmth and hope filling the house; this resonates with the title noting that the poem was composed during the early spring, which usually connotes vitality and buoyancy. Additionally, like Xu Can, the author applies an allusion to Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun, in the context of illness and the spousal relationship. Clearly, Sun uses Xiangru to refer to himself based on many things they had in common. Firstly, they both suffered from ailments. Although it is unknown what kind of sickness was attacking Sun at this time, his suffering is clearly indicated in the title. According to historical records, Sima Xiangru had diabetes, which was the cause of his death. Secondly, Sima also had a companionate relationship with Zhuo Wenjun, who was also a talented woman poet. Their marriage rested on mutual affection, which resulted in their elopement, and they survived their financial crisis through Wenjun's efforts of selling alcohol. As is shown by Xi Peilan and Sun's other poetic works, Xi made a great contribution to the family economy. Interestingly, this series constantly demonstrates the tension between Sun's claims and the emotions underlying the descriptions. For example, he conveys his hope of cultivating his appreciation of Buddhism to reduce the vexations of *qing*; yet, he does not stop talking about *qing* throughout this whole series of poems. He even concludes with an expression of deep affection for his wife that is totally contradictory to the gesture he makes at the beginning of this set of poems.

When talking about the illness of spouses, both of them choose to avoid mentioning the symptoms and turn to focus on beautiful scenery as well as poetic composition, which serves as a means to cure illness or at least mitigate the suffering due to it. The poem talking about the illness that Xi Peilan suffers from is an example of this tendency:

內子就醫吳門，泊舟虎丘山塘，得遊能起疾勝求醫七字，屬為足成之
 “[When] My Wife Sought for a Doctor at Wumen,⁸³ [We] Moored the Boat on
 the Shantang [River around] Tiger Mountain. [She] Got a Seven-word Line
 Saying that Touring is able to Arouse [a Person] from Illness Better than
 Seeking for Doctors, and Commanded Me to Complete it into a Poem”
 清秋澹蕩與人期，九里香中一櫂移

In the clear autumn, the weather was mild and pleasant; we had an appointment
 with someone.

Amid fragrances spreading nine *li*, a boat moved.

眠亦對山如讀畫，遊能起疾勝求醫

Sleeping also enables one to face mountains as if reading a picture;

Touring is able to lift a person out of illness better than seeking for doctors.

隨心得句平奇好，沿路看花去住宜

Following her heart, she got poetic lines; her level and paradoxical pulse⁸⁴
 improved.

Along the road, we saw flowers and, in this place, either staying or leaving felt
 fine.

我自吹簫卿寫韻，尋常家事道旁疑

I personally played the flute and she wrote verses;

Our common familial matters caused people on the side of the road to doubt.⁸⁵

As the title shows, it is apparent that illness is an occasion that allows the couple to express their intimacy both in reality and in literary creation. Seeking a medical doctor offers them an opportunity to travel together by themselves. Given that, the descriptions from the first to the third line read like other poems on sightseeing; the poem does not say much about the illness itself. It implies that the ailment troubling his wife is actually a

⁸³ This is another name of Suzhou, since this area belonged to the Wu state during the Spring and Autumn.

⁸⁴ In traditional Chinese medical theory, a level pulse indicates a healthy condition and a paradoxical pulse denotes pulse decreases, even diminution while breathing.

⁸⁵ Sun Yuanxiang, “Neizi jiuyi Wumen po Huqiu shantang de ‘You neng qiji sheng qiuyi’ qizi. zhu wei zhucheng zhi,” in *Tianzhen’ge ji*, p. 325.

minor one; in addition, the author follows the gender rule of poetic composition that descriptions of bodies including symptoms were not appropriate topics for poems by gentry women. Also, it is evident from the second line to the end that the poets are enjoying not only the beautiful scenery but also each other's congenial company in this period of intimacy away from their regular daily duties. Sun Yuanxiang indicates that this poem is under Peilan's command. This suggests that they are equals in the same manner as same-sex poetic friends. Further, on account of the closeness of husband and wife, their poetic communication is not restricted to matching each other in harmonious rhymes; they can also write a single poem together replying to each other. Here, Xi Peilan actually set the topic and content of this poem. This serves as evidence to illustrate the mutual influence on poetic composition of literary couples. Furthermore, the poet states that musical instrument playing and writing are common practices in their family. The paralleling of flute playing and poetry composition not only underscores their talents as on a par, the equality in their interaction, and his wife's identity as poet but also suggests their great compatibility and their cooperation through the choice of instrument and dulcet sounds and rhymes. However, the poet places a contrary viewpoint at the end; the doubts of other people could indicate that a spousal relationship that is both equal and close was not commonly seen. Supporting Zhang Jie's argument that talented gentry women as a group were "strangers" to the society, traveling meant transporting the one who is a "stranger" in domestic space into the public realm.⁸⁶ This poetic line reveals Sun's awareness of the strangeness. Nonetheless, when the poets present themselves as an

⁸⁶ Zhang Jie 張杰, *Shouxi de moshengren: Ming Qing Jiangnan shehui cainü qunti xianxiang de shehuixue yanjiu* 熟悉的陌生人: 明清江南社會才女群體現象的社會學研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2015), p. 123.

exceptional case different from others, the uniqueness that they share strengthens, to a certain degree, the sense of their intimacy.

Apart from the function of poetry within a husband and wife relationship, the link between poetry and illness here is also obvious. Xi Peilan states that travel is able to cure her sickness, and Sun Yuanxiang connects her recovery with the acquisition of verses. The efficacy of sightseeing and the composition of poetry are encapsulated in the third couplet. Penning a brilliant poetic line makes evident the progress in her health. Also, the painting-like and pleasant scenery in the following line, written at Sun's suggestion, not only creates a delightful mood for them both during their departure, but also makes this place a great location to settle down due to its "curing effects." This poem neatly exemplifies illness as an occasion for companionate couples to create and reveal their closeness. In addition, it attests the contemporary trend that is especially conspicuous in poetic culture of talented women regarding poetry as an elixir for their ailments.⁸⁷ In Xi Peilan's case, the concept of poetry as a remedy is not merely a belief but reality.

In addition to echoing each other within a single poem, Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan also wrote poems replying to each other in talking about Sun's "illness."⁸⁸ A poem composed by Sun indicates that he is ill at the time of the Double Ninth Festival. Accordingly, the poet does not say much about his ailment and its symptoms; rather, he places most of his emphasis on his being unable to attend a gathering with his friends owing to the sickness. Additionally, he specifies, "My body is idle contrarily depending on an illness that lasted for three autumns" 身閒轉賴三秋病. As a result of his suffering

⁸⁷ See Grace Fong, "Writing and Illness," p. 45.

⁸⁸ Sun Yuanxiang, "Bingzhong chongjiu" 病中重九, in *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p. 66; Xi Peilan, "Da fuzi bingzhong zuo" 答夫子病中作, in *Changzhen 'ge ji*, p. 625.

from the chronic ailment, he states, “My bones are strong, but the only thing I have left is one *juan* of poetry” 骨健惟餘一卷詩. Sun picks the term “gu” 骨 (bones) to refer to his whole body. This choice is made for the sake of matching with the previous line. More importantly, this line suggests that poetry is the sole form of integrity and that he still possesses its lofty style as if it were as essential to him as his bones. Having already missed his date with his friends, Sun Yuanxiang still forces himself to climb up a tower, where he recognizes green mountains and trees with red leaves as his old acquaintances.

Writing under the same circumstance, Xi Peilan on the one hand follows the tradition of this subgenre that turns illness into a stage of self-fashioning. At the same time, Xi emphasizes her image as a worthy wife and underscores her intimacy with her ill husband. Obviously, to her, wifely virtues and connubial intimacy are not totally contradictory. The poem reads:

答夫子病中作 “Reply the Poem that My Husband Composed in the Middle of his Illness”

賢如夫子豈長貧，貧也何為病及身

How could a person worthy like you, my husband, be for a long time in poverty?

What does poverty do to you that makes illness attack your body?

妃被蚤防秋氣冷，牛衣休認淚痕新

Taking out a quilt with a mandarin duck pattern early to defend against cold autumn weather;

Do not recognize new tear stains on the blankets for oxen.⁸⁹

耦耕久分為荊婦，中饋猶能奉老親

Long parting from pairing, plowing for the wife using a hairpin made of twigs of bramble;

Your wife⁹⁰ is still capable of serving the elder parents.

⁸⁹ Clothes for oxen refers to an allusion about poverty, illness, and the husband and wife relationship. Wang Zhang 王章 was extremely poor before getting his official position. He did not even have a quilt. Once when he was sick, he had to lie in clothes for oxen to keep warm. He thought he would not be able to survive and bid farewell to his wife in tears. His wife severely reproached him, saying that none of the officials at the court were comparable to him, and saying how despicable he was to not think of exerting himself but only to weep.

⁹⁰ “Zhongkui” indicates the place for providing meals in a household; later it became a term to refer to one’s wife.

疆起好尋春日伴，青山紅樹唱酬頻

Force yourself to rise from the sickbed in order to find a companion in the spring time;

Green mountains and red trees frequently compose poems with matching harmonious rhymes.⁹¹

Unlike her husband placing the emphasis on his confinement and detachment owing to the illness, Xi Peilan aims her attention at poverty and the sickness that results from it. Male writers adopted the strategy of describing poverty and the hardship their spouses had to undergo as compliments to their virtues and as expression of affection. Like many male authors, Xi Peilan takes the illness of her partner as a great opportunity to glorify his worthiness and reveal the close relationship between them. In light of this, the poetess is self-fashioning at the same time. At the beginning of this poem, Xi Peilan takes the encouraging and convincing attitude that she usually does when facing obstacles. She states more than one time in her poetic works that she strongly believes Sun Yuanxiang will succeed in a short time. However, the reality, namely that his suffering from ailments delays his achievement, makes her question the unfairness of his fate: how come such a decent man is afflicted with poverty and the resulting sickness?

In the following couplet, Xi Peilan presents herself as a supportive as well as caring wife. She is not only considerate enough to take out a quilt, symbolizing the warmth provided by a wife, in advance to prevent chill, but is also encouraging of her husband's not being stopped by poverty and weak health. She chooses two terms to connote the intimacy between husband and wife: a comforter with a pattern of mandarin ducks, which were always regarded as symbols of married couples in a close relationship, and blankets

⁹¹ Xi Peilan, "Da fuzi bingzhong zuo," in *Changzhen'ge ji*, p. 625.

for oxen, which directly allude to a famous woman who urged her impoverished husband to pursue his success. She also encourages Sun Yuanxiang not to worry about the difficulties and the feeling of bitterness that she would encounter. Also, with the tough tone conveyed by the term “xiuren” 休認, the poetess emphasizes her strong ability to handle the household. But this term also focuses attention on the teardrop stains; it seems to remind her husband to remember her sacrifices. The term “plowing in pairs” originally did not contain connotations of husband and wife. However, placed in the context of this poem, the phrase seems to hint that they as a couple have been parted for a long time due to his attending the civil service exam, while she as his humble wife therefore handled all of the matters in the domestic space, including serving her elderly parents-in-law.

After calling attention to her abilities, Xi Peilan turns back upon her initial intention of cheering up her husband. She replies to the regret that Sun Yuanxiang expresses in his poem by saying that he will still have a chance in the springtime. Considering the coming exam the next spring, she urges him to go find companions for the journey. Interestingly, Sun’s poem ends with his regarding green mountains and red-leaf trees as his old friends to compensate his loss, while Xi Peilan concludes hers by altering her description of both of these things so as to symbolize the couple themselves. She is reminding her husband that she is not only his wife but also his poetic friend, who as such should not be forgotten. Through highlighting their frequent poetic communication, the author not only reinforces their intimacy throughout this piece, but also adds another layer, expressing her identity as a women poet, into her image as presented in this poem. Xi Peilan successfully transforms the occasion of her husband’s illness into a stage of self-fashioning as well as an expression of intimacy.

There was another set of contemporary ideas that linked enervation and problems of health with literary composition, especially for talented women,⁹² and that completely contradicts the idea of poetry as therapy for illness in the previously mentioned verse. Interestingly enough, in Sun Yuanxiang's record, Xi Peilan even cautions him against reading while he is sick. In one of his poems, he mentions that in order to help him abstain from reading books while ill, Xi removed all of the books in his collection. The same thing happened when Sun was convalescing from a month-long ailment that he had contracted while traveling. He describes, "Sitting silently, I suddenly feel uncomfortable. The book lies open and I exhale a long and slow sound. My mountain wife grabs it away in ire, claiming that she is afraid that reading would wear off my heart" 默坐忽不適, 攤書一長吟. 山妻怒奪去, 謂恐耗我心.⁹³ The portrayed scene clearly suggests that Peilan is paying close attention to her sick spouse so that she can take immediate action, which shows her meticulous care. Additionally, her reason for the restriction corresponds to the contemporary medical knowledge that mental exhaustion would aggravate the sickness, but in the depiction here she seems to be overreacting. Sun takes a completely opposite stance, the same in the poem on Peilan's podiatric ailment, on the matter. He states that he then forced himself to lay down to take a nap. Nevertheless, when his spirit has no means that he can depend on, he will particularly feel the invasion of coldness. Afterwards, he fetches a book to read again and feels contented. Based on her own utterly opposite attitude and experiences, Sun Yuanxiang concludes, "Woman's words should

⁹² Binbin Yang, "Women and the Aesthetics of Illness," pp. 25–37.

⁹³ Sun Yuanxiang, "Zhou zhi Shaobodai, hu zhong hanji, jiyao zhuanju, ji binyu wei. fanli hou wochuang yiyue, bingqi zashu" 舟至召伯埭, 忽中寒疾, 醫藥轉劇, 幾瀕於危. 返里後臥床一月, 病起雜述, in *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p. 216.

not be listened to; I revere Liu Ling's proverb" 婦言不可聽，吾奉劉伶箴。⁹⁴ According to *Shishuo xinyu*, Liu Ling's wife exhorted him to abstain from drinking after Liu fell sick from overdrinking. Liu pretended to be convinced. When vowing to the heavens, he surprisingly declares that he was born to drink and that a woman's words should not be listened to.⁹⁵ Sun applies the allusion to insist on his own stance. In this poem, he describes Xi Peilan as a careful and responsible wife, while at the same time, and in spite of her obstruction, highlighting his own diligence and fondness of reading. This poetic line interestingly echoes his friend Shu Wei's suggestion that he should listen to his wife's words about not yet being old.⁹⁶ Although in different contexts, Sun seems to reply to his friend with a negative answer. While this could be taken as an exaggerated joke, it reveals the inequality rooted in the Confucian male-centered gender ideology. In the following piece in this series of poems, he states that he piles books along with a zither on the bed and finds it pleasing to read them whenever he likes. Like the earlier poets, Sun attributes this leisurely pleasure to sickness. More importantly, in placing two verses together, the poet reinforces the idea of reading as a great enjoyment during, and as a remedy for, his illness.

Even though there is no verse can be ascertained to be Sun's work that talks about how he reacted when his wife was sick, he composed a series of poems describing a woman in the process of recuperation. In the title, the author selects an ambiguous term, "guiren" 閨人, which means women, or sometimes a wife, to refer to the protagonist. At the beginning, Sun points out that the "guiren" is a talented woman as gifted as Sima

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ See Liu Yiqing, *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, p. 607.

⁹⁶ See Introduction, note 1.

Xiangru. Due to illness, she is confined behind the smoke of herbal medicines as well as a precious screen to an even smaller space in the inner chamber, which the poet beautifies as the place where Chang E 嫦娥 lives. This simile sets the basic tone; throughout the whole series, Sun describes the woman as an immortal. He does not touch much on her symptoms; the poem reads like a common *gongti*-style poem on a beauty, receiving the male gaze in the circumstance of sickness. In addition to her snowy skin and emaciated body, the interaction with her spouse also comes into view. The man holds the silver spoon, stirring the liquid medicine, and states that, “As the one who has the same heart as you, I would like to share and taste sweetness and bitterness together” 同心甘苦願分嘗.⁹⁷ In the portrayal, through providing some care, although far less than Xi Peilan gives her sick husband, the man fully displays his tenderness. In addition, he emphasizes himself as the object of adoration of his wife and she as his. Meanwhile, the term also denotes having the same mind and target; placed in this context, the line also contains the meaning of fighting illness together through the action of serving the medicine. By exploiting the situation of illness, he uses the bitterness of medicine and suffering of disease to suggest difficulties in life that he would like to shoulder for her.

The next poem in the series is devoted to the poetic composition by the woman persona. On account of illness, she temporarily stops writing the piece to celebrate the coming of the lunar New Year. Also, since she is using challenging rhymes, while recumbent, she still searches for references from books surrounding the bed. Her passionate devotion to poetry is exhibited not only in her inability to completely put the composition aside but also in their spousal interaction. “While lying, she hears Qin Jia’s

⁹⁷ Sun Yuanxiang, “Guiren yang’e ci” 閨人養疴詞, in *Tianzhen’ge waiji* 天真閣外集, p. 580.

verse. In order to deliberately select⁹⁸ one single suitable word, she again drains her spirit” 臥中聽得秦嘉詠，一字推敲又損神。⁹⁹ Undoubtedly, this shows that despite the exacerbation of her own health condition, this female character still cannot resist the fascination of poetry. Additionally, illness along with poetic writing evidently creates a perfect space filled with intimate feeling for a companionate couple accompanying each other to discuss their shared interests. More significantly, it manifests the involvement of both husband and wife in the process of poetic composition. Although Sun Yuanxiang does not provide obvious details that could identify the persona with Xi Peilan, his descriptions of the interaction between the persona and her husband can at least be regarded as images in his mind of an ideal couple.

Apart from its association with reading, illness could also be linked with impoverishment. In another poem on convalescence, Sun Yuanxiang reveals that books serve him not only as an intangible amusement but also as palpable property. He points to books placed at his bedside and orders his wife to sell them to buy some congee, which would barely feed the family. In this way, he can soothe both his crying children and helpless wife. Those books are the last “precious” things they own, owing to his chronic illness; they have sold all of their belongings for medicines, until now he has been so destitute that only the four walls of the house remain.

The topic of the entanglement of sickness and poverty and the vicious circle between them is also a major theme of poems on sickness by Ye Shaoyuan and Shen Yixiu. When Yixiu was suffering from sickness and poverty, Shaoyuan wrote two sets of

⁹⁸ See Chapter 1, note 34.

⁹⁹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Guiren yang’e ci,” in *Tianzhen’ge waiji*, p. 580.

ten poems that he presented to Yixiu as gifts. Illness serves as an occasion to express his worry and consideration for his wife. Ye looks at her reflection in the mirror and pities his wife's emaciation owing to her sickness. Additionally, he exhorts Shen to refrain from sadness at the consecutive deaths of their children: "Darling, you should not still grieve for the matter of *qing*; who would pity for this night of penury and sickness?" 卿卿莫更傷情事，貧病誰憐此一宵¹⁰⁰ His affection is manifested in the appellation "qingqing," which creates an intimate feeling through reduplication and the nasal pronunciation; also, by posing the question, he indirectly indicates himself as the one to take pity on and feel tenderness to Shen. The embarrassing situation inevitably causes his worry that "poverty is approaching and the silk quilt is thin; I hope you will not let illness close in intimately, since the plain screen is weak" 貧促羅衾今夜薄，莫教病狎素屏虛。¹⁰¹ More significantly, the author voices his earnest hope for her recovery and future company: "I only hope today that the illness immediately spares you; when staying with you, evenings of poverty are indeed beautiful nights" 但願病今旋釋去，與君貧夜即良宵。¹⁰² Evidently, he regards his time spent with Yixiu as precious moments that beautify their life and allow them to forget their hardships in reality. Meanwhile, Ye Shaoyuan anticipates their future activities together in order to cheer her up: "When can you rise from illness offering me the chance to talk with you about penury? Cutting the wick of

¹⁰⁰ Ye Shaoyuan, "Yihai qiuri zengfu pinbing shi shishou" 乙亥秋日贈婦貧病詩十首, in *Qinzhai yuan* 秦齋怨, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 597.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Ye Shaoyuan, "Neiren bingshen, weiji qise, yaoer kanshi zhixia, wei erbei dianding fangben, dou cheng menkuang, yu youfu qingxu suoran, shuji shouyin keyi jiezh. zai zuo daida shiyu yan juanshou, yi dang Meisheng zhi fa ye" 內人病甚，未即起色，藥餌看視之暇，為兒輩點定房本，都成悶況，鬱又復情緒索然，庶幾愁吟可以解之，再作代答十鬱掩卷首，亦當枚生之發也, in in *Qinzhai yuan*, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 599. [Hereafter as "Neiren bingshen"]

candles and chatting closely and paddling and floating in a pool of alcohol¹⁰³ with you” 何時病起供貧話，剪燭同君拍酒浮。¹⁰⁴ As Ye himself mentions, not only do they interact like bosom friends, but he also fits his wife into the ideal image of a male literati. According to contemporary ideas, possessing the demeanor of male literati, particularly in literary depictions and a literary style, is a great compliment to a poetess, and this praise is often used on Shen.

In sum, sickness offered chances for male literati to glorify the womanly virtues of their wives through detailed descriptions of the meticulous care the latter provided, including treatments for ailments as well as the care transmitted by ordinary touch, and through their ability to manage numerous matters in a household while caring for a sick husband at the same time. Their careful tending of their partners not only demonstrated the wives’ consideration of their husbands but also offered men a means to express their affection. Yet, when the wives suffered from sickness, their spouses provided little physical care and much worry and companionship instead. The time of resting and convalescence, however, did provide both partners with added leisure time, during which literary activities functioned as the major means to demonstrate and enact their closeness. Poetic composition and reading in the context of sickness served as enjoyment and yet also could endanger the health of one whose health was fragile. Nonetheless, the literary activities were also for many a means of overcoming the poverty they suffered from, which could seriously intensify the misery of illness.

¹⁰³ An allusion that means indulging oneself in amusements of poetry and alcohol.

¹⁰⁴ Ye Shaoyuan, “Neiren bingshen,” in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 600.

Poverty

As Ye Shaoyuan's poems composed during the period when Shen was suffering from illness have shown in the previous section, sickness usually correlated with poverty. In the Confucian moral ideology, the ability and willingness to endure poverty was long regarded as virtuous for both men and women. Thus, talking about impoverishment in poetry served to affirm the dominant moral code. Additionally, as I pointed out in chapter one, in Ye's reminiscence of his marriage, destitution also stimulated the intimacy of couples by motivating them to fight together against poverty. Nevertheless, gentry women were not fully compliant or without complaints. Shen Yixiu voiced her dissatisfaction about her husband's lack of success in a manner blending joking and seriousness.

Not surprisingly, in order to praise the morals of his wife, in addition to glorifying her compliance towards her mother-in-law, in the posthumous records of Shen Yixiu, Ye Shaoyuan also endeavors to depict her virtue of being able to endure poverty. Before speaking of the matter of giving money to his friend, Shaoyuan felt hesitant since he knew that she needed to sell her dowry. Shen not only agreed to offer help right away but also refused the suggestion of recompense in the future that Ye proposed.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, facing a need frequently to pawn possessions, they would sit together and read Bao Zhao's 鮑照 "Chouku xing" 愁苦行 ("Song of Sorrow and Bitterness"), which would provoke them both to laughter.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Ye Shaoyuan, "Wangshi Shen anren zhuan," in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 226.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

Ye also states that since his income and expenses were completely handled by his wife, he had no idea where the money was. As mentioned in the section on mourning poems, when looking for money for funeral expenses, he only found piles of receipts for loans mixed with manuscripts of poetry.¹⁰⁷ Owing to his financial embarrassment, his wife would repeatedly bring up the idea of changing the bed canopy, which had been hung thirty years earlier but was still tidy and neat although the color had faded, yet each time would give up the idea as too wasteful. However, despite their monetary embarrassment, Shen was willing to sell her gold hairpin and earrings to offer alms for Ye's nephew as well as a friend of his. In this, Ye Shaoyuan revealed not only the image of his wife as virtuous, but also demonstrates the quantity and complexity of family matters that a gentry wife ought to deal with.¹⁰⁸

Shen also voiced her opinions about poverty in her poetic works.¹⁰⁹ She uses several iconically coded images, such as cranes, chrysanthemums, firewood, bamboos, and high mountains, to portray the atmosphere of reclusion. She sometimes describes her moods as carefree, unrestrained, and unconventional. In light of this, in addition to the sorrow aroused by the seasonal scenic changes, she demonstrates a relaxed and peaceful attitude to nature. However, as time goes on, in Shen's depiction, poverty creates disharmonious voices in their spousal relationship. Shen does not display a wholly virtuous image; she utters her discontent. Shen's poem reads:

貧居贈仲韶 “Poem on Living in Poverty Presented to Zhongshao [i.e. Ye Shaoyuan]”

鶴鳴雨埵亂煙飛，苔徑蒼茫落翠微

¹⁰⁷ Ye Shaoyuan, “Qiwang er pin,” verse 8, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 605.

¹⁰⁸ Ye Shaoyuan, “Wangshi Shen anren zhuan,” in *Wumengtang ji*, pp. 226–28.

¹⁰⁹ Shen Yixiu, “Qiuri cunju: he Zhongshao zuo” 秋日村居：和仲韶作, in *Wumengtang ji*, pp. 53–55. Unfortunately, the poems from Ye's side are not extant.

Cranes are crying on the ant-hills before the rain,¹¹⁰ and tangled mists are floating;

A path covered with moss is in a blur, and its end falls deep into the green mountains.

病久所須憐藥乏，缺彈空自嘆魚稀

It is a pity to be suffering from illness for a long time and devoid of needed medicine;

The beating sword vainly deplores the scarcity of fish.¹¹¹

秦庭不為貂裘敝，燕市何關駿骨非

The court of the Qin state was not responsible for the raggedness of the mink coat;¹¹²

What did the market in the Yan state have to do with not being the bones of a fine steed?¹¹³

獻賦金門曾已遇，對君依舊泣牛衣

You have encountered the chance to deferentially present a rhapsody at the Golden Gate;¹¹⁴

Facing you, I still weep under the blanket for oxen.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ The allusion of cranes crying on the ant-hills is from “Dongshan” 東山 of the *Shijing*; it says, “The cranes were crying on the ant-hills; Our wives were sighing in their rooms” 鶴鳴於垤，婦嘆於室。 According to Mao Heng 毛亨 and Zheng Xuan’s exegeses, a cavity would seem overcast and rainy at first due to its location. Cranes are fond of water, and therefore they will cry when it is about to rain to express their happiness. Soldiers on expeditions suffer most when it is raining; their wives will sigh for them on account of worries about their toil. See Ruan Yuan, ed., *Maoshi zhushu*, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, vol. 2, p. 523.

¹¹¹ “Beating sword” refers to the story of Feng Xuan 馮諼, who served as a retainer of the Lord of Mengchang 孟嘗君 because of his poverty. After being a low-level retainer for a while, Feng felt frustrated that he was not valued highly. Hence, he beat his sword and sang a song saying, “How about returning home, sword? There was no fish in the meals. The second time he sang there was no carriage going out, and the third time he had nothing to support his family. This phrase then became a term describing a gifted person who was not recognized his/her talents and longed for opportunities. See Liu Xiang, comp. and ed., Zhang Qingchang and Wang Yandong, annots., *Zhanguo ce jianzhu*, pp. 263–64.

¹¹² “Ragged mink coat” alludes to the experience of Su Qin 蘇秦. He used to present his strategies to the sovereign of Qin ten times. The lord nevertheless did not accept it at all. In the end, he exhausted all of his money, wore out his black mink coat, and had to leave the State of Qin, returning his homeland. See Liu Xiang, comp. and ed., Zhang Qingchang and Wang Yandong, annots., *Zhanguo ce jianzhu*, p. 63.

¹¹³ “Bones of the steed” is from Guo Wei’s 郭隗 eloquent speech to King Zhao of Yan about investing in the recruitment of talented people. Guo used allegory to convince the king, saying that in the past, there was a sovereign willing to buy a great steed for a thousand taels of gold, and yet had failed to obtain one for three years. A cleaner told the sovereign that he was able to get it. After three months, the cleaner bought the head of a dead steed for five hundred taels of gold. The sovereign was furious and scolded him that what he wanted was a live steed. How could the cleaner buy a dead horse using five hundred taels of gold?! The cleaner explained that when the sovereign was willing to pay five hundred taels of gold for a dead horse, the common people would believe that he truly wanted an excellent steed regardless how much it cost. As expected, not until a year later, the sovereign got three steeds. See Liu Xiang, comp. and ed., Zhang Qingchang and Wang Yandong, annots., *Zhanguo ce jianzhu*, p. 777

¹¹⁴ “Respectfully present rhapsody” refers to Sima Xiangru’s and Yang Xiong’s experiences of gaining appreciation from the emperors for their literary works. Also, they then had chances to present their rhapsodies to meet the emperors’ requirements. “Golden Gate” is an abbreviation of “Golden Horse Gate,” which was one of the gates of the Han imperial palace. Its name was derived from the bronze horse by the gate; the palace was the place where officials waited for summonses from the emperors.

¹¹⁵ Shen Yixiu, “Pinju zeng Zhongshao,” in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 81.

Shen Yixiu at the beginning portrays a gloomy scene to set the basic tone of the verse. Not only does the crane whistling over the overcast and humid air create a dreary surrounding, but the tangled vapor also connotes the inner state of the author. In addition, the poetess alludes to “Dongshan” 東山 in the *Shijing*,¹¹⁶ talking about toil and yearning on a military expedition. The male narrator of the ode imagines the worries that occupied his wife’s mind when she heard the crane calls and sensed the prospective rainfall. In light of this, Shen suggests that her concerns are for her husband; more importantly, corresponding to the subject of her poem, her present worries concerning the embarrassed financial condition of the family. Further details that she provides exacerbate the sense of their poverty and the misery in many aspects of their life. Additionally, Shen uses another allusion to indicate that notwithstanding his talents, Ye Shaoyuan still laments, vainly, the failure to achieve recognition in his career. Consequent upon this failure, the family is thus in a poor condition. Interesting enough, Shen Yixiu does not purely play the role of offering comfort to her husband as other gentry women poets do. Instead, she uses two historical instances to argue that talented people unable to demonstrate their abilities and realize their ambitions should not blame the places. In the end, she even overtly points out that Ye had once obtained the opportunity to present his capabilities in the bureaucracy. However, at the present time, the couple still wept at its impoverishment. Even though in the original allusion of weeping beneath blankets for oxen, the wife steadfastly believed that her husband’s abilities exceeded those of any other contemporary scholars, Shen Yixiu diverges slightly from the prototype. In this context,

¹¹⁶ “Dongshan,” in Ruan Yuan, ed., *Maoshi zhushu*, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, vol. 2, pp. 294b–97b.

Shen, on the one hand, fits herself into the niche of the virtuous wife in the original story, while on the other hand, she somehow expresses her complaint in teasing that even though they have gone through a glorious climax, their economic status remains poor.

Even though the poverty that Ye Shaiyuan and Shen Yixiu describe in their works may be only partially real, mixing with literary exaggeration, an impoverished situation did offer the cultured couple a condition in which to construct their ideal images, and especially for Ye Shaoyuan. As Martin Huang has indicated, through emphasizing his own incompetence, Ye glorifies Shen Yixiu's great virtues; simultaneously, he presents himself as a man full of *qing* in relation to his wife.¹¹⁷ Yet, differently from the reminiscence of her husband, Shen Yixiu reveals her worry, bitterness, and even discontent with the situation. It was one that somehow manifested the discrepancy between the viewpoints of men and the reality that gentry women actually struggled with. Ye Shaoyuan's record clearly suggests that his mother exercised dominance in the family in terms of its financial resources, which she managed. It is easy to imagine that there must have been some limitations on Shen Yixiu's uses of money. After her mother-in-law passed away, Shen, as the person in charge of financial management, then experienced a serious embarrassment with regard to their economic situation owing to Ye's having resigned from officialdom. In other words, the anxiety of being short on money followed her throughout the entire period of the marriage and was a pressure that her husband found it hard to fully understand.

Poverty does not appear in isolation in Ye Shaoyuan's and Shen Yixiu's works. As with Ye, impoverishment serves as a vivid backdrop to Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan's

¹¹⁷ Martin Huang, "Negotiating Wifely Virtues," pp. 118–22.

tight and harmonious connubial relationship. Additionally, their embarrassed financial situation was also an important factor that Sun used to extol the great virtues exemplified by his wife. Sun's verse reads:

疊韻示內 “Repeating the Same Rhymes with the Previous Verse in the Collection to Present to My Wife”
 閨中一笑兩忘貧，歌嘯能全凍餒身
 Smiling at each other in the inner chamber, the two of us forget about poverty;
 Singing and whistling can preserve bodies from freezing and starving.
 赤手為炊才見巧，白頭同夢總如新
 With bare hands,¹¹⁸ you can cook meals and your cleverness is therefore seen;
 Until one's head is white,¹¹⁹ the feeling of dreaming together¹²⁰ always feels
 like new.
 圖書漸富釵環減，鍼黹偏疏筆硯親
 Our collection of books gradually gets rich, but your hairpins and earrings
 decrease;
 Your needlework is unexpectedly rusty, and yet you are familiar with brushes
 and ink stones.
 還恐不窮工未絕，開尊勸我典衣頻
 I am even afraid not impoverished enough so that my poetic skills are not yet
 extraordinary;
 When I lift up the wine cup, you exhort me that I have been pawning clothes
 too often.¹²¹

In this verse, Sun Yuanxiang places a conspicuous emphasis on poverty, which connects tightly to the virtues presented by his wife, but also to their close marital relationship and mutual understanding. The poet emphasizes his own morality through a typical activity of

¹¹⁸ Here “bare hands” means without any resources. Also, there is an idiom saying, “It is hard even for an ingenious wife who is unable to cook a meal when she is short of rice” 巧婦難為無米之炊, to indicate the situation where without crucial elements, no capable people could achieve the goal. However, the poet twists this saying into an appraisal to his wife that her skillfulness is therefore highlighted through successfully overcoming adversities.

¹¹⁹ This term refers to old age and it also has the meaning of a loving couple respecting each other and living together until old age.

¹²⁰ “Tongmeng” 同夢 (to sleep and dream together) alludes to a line in *The Book of Odes* saying, “The insects are flying in buzzing crowds; it would be sweet to lie by you and dream” 蟲飛薨薨，甘與子同夢. According to Zheng Xuan's exegesis, when the dawn is approaching, the narrator considers that to enjoy lying together with her spouse is to suggest their great intimacy. Later, this term became an allusion to a husband and wife being deeply in love. See Ruan Yuan, ed., *Maoshi zhushu*, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, vol. 2, p. 188b.

¹²¹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Dieyun shi'nei,” in *Tianzhen'ge ji*, p. 35.

a recluse, singing and whistling,¹²² which he believes can help him to endure, or even protect him from, material shortage. This perfectly corresponds to the Confucian moral standard of being content with destitution. Fortunately, his wife, the main character and the first reader of this poem, shares this same quality with him, as he indicates in the opening line. The impoverishment also serves as a significant parameter to make her wifely virtues and capabilities more prominent. In his portrayal, she not only strives for the family's basic survival by managing its limited resources, but also worries about the financial situation along with her husband's health. Interestingly, poverty does not impede their devotion to literary composition but even prompts it. Sun Yuanxiang playfully appropriates a widespread idea from Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–72) that only poverty can make poets create great poetry, and uses it to ridicule himself. He defends his frequent expenses on drinking as an effort to get closer to the state of privation and the following excellent poetic creation. Additionally, his pawning of clothes for alcohol may echo the statement of his admired predecessor, Du Fu: “Returning from court day after day, I pawn my spring clothes. Every time I come drunk from the riverbank”¹²³ 朝回日日典春衣，每日江頭盡醉歸。 However, unlike Du Fu, Sun Yuanxiang has a worthy wife shouldering the wifely responsibility of advising him to do the right thing. Meanwhile, in

¹²² The famous story about the virtuous hermit and whistling is about Ruan Ji 阮籍 and Sun Deng 孫登. The former was a renowned literatus and official, and the latter was a recluse. When Ruan paid Sun a visit at Mount Sumen 蘇門, Sun would not answer Ruan at all no matter what he asked. Until Ruan whistled at length, Sun finally smiled and invited him to continue. Ruan did this one more time and until his interest was exhausted, when he left. When Ruan was on the half way back, he heard “a shrillness like an orchestra of many instruments, while forests and valleys re-echoed with the sounds.” That was the reply from Sun. For more details see, Richard Mather, trans., *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*, p. 354.

¹²³ Du Fu, “Qujiang ershou(qi'er)” 曲江二首(其二), in *Dushi xiangzhu* 杜詩詳注, annot. Qiu Zhao'ao 仇兆鰲 (1638–1717) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), p. 447; The translation is from Irving Y. Lo. See Wu-chi Liu and Irving Yucheng Lo, *Sunflower Splendor: Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry* (Bloomington&Indianapolis: Indiana Univeristy Press, 1975), p. 127.

the description of her husband, Xi Peilan is not only virtuous in her attitudes but also zealous in the literary activity that is their shared interest. Her passion is fully displayed in her willingness to sell (or pawn) her precious jewelry for books. From this, it is reasonable to conjecture that she is also willing to trade in her valuable belongings for the family, as she indicates in her own verse congratulating Sun's success on the civil service exam. Simultaneously, it illustrates that she does not care about money and is enchanted with reading and writing. Moreover, Sun's pawning his clothes for alcohol and Xi's selling her possessions for books form an interesting contrast: he presents himself as a careless man while his wife is an enthusiastic talented woman.

As a cultured woman, she is invested in love of reading as well as composition. The poet humorously teases her that she spends so much time on writing rather than embroidery and this results in her awkwardness in using her skills. Based on this, Sun Yuanxiang is making a contrast highlighting her devotion to literary creation, and somehow poking fun with his wife that she is not perfect in every respect. Through teasing her about her clumsy needlework, their intimacy is demonstrated, especially considering that he is showing this piece to Xi Peilan as its first reader. Additionally, the poet overtly reveals their strong and longstanding relationship; they are not only facing and overcoming difficulties together but also sharing the same interests and affection. More importantly, their financial predicament does not erode their ties, but on the contrary, it strengthens it. Sun is even able to discover refreshing feelings within the relationship.

Apart from presenting this poem to his wife as means to add savor to their closeness, the intended readership of this verse also to certain extent affects how the two figures, the

wife and the poet himself, are represented in this piece. As the author indicates in the title, this poem is for his wife, who is then supposed to be his first reader. Based on this, his downplaying himself and extoling Xi Peilan could be a sort of writing strategy intended to flatter her. His portrayal of her thus consists of how he regards her and the image of herself that she wants to be presented in public, namely as a virtuous wife and a talented woman.

Generally, poverty serves as the perfect backdrop for praising the virtues of both genders. In addition, by means of struggling against poverty together, both financially and spiritually, the intimacy between literate husband and wife is evinced. On top of that, in their impecunious situation, the fondness of literature helps them to overcome their predicament, which at the same time strengthens their devotion to poetry.

Daily life

Although many poems focused on special days or circumstances, a couple's intimacy could also be revealed in poems on more ordinary shared activities. In addition to expressions of affection, they continually highlight the wifely virtues of endurance of poverty. However, besides such positive dimensions, women poets sometimes also voiced their complaints about poverty to their husbands. In depictions in poetic exchanges, literary activities, particularly poetic composition, still played a significant role in the conjugal relationship. One of Sun Yuanxiang's poems can serve as a perfect example of mixing their enjoyment of literary activity and spousal intimacy. The verse reads:

內人抄索笑集成戲書其後 “My Wife Completed Transcribing *Suoxiao ji*¹²⁴ ,
and I Playfully Wrote This Verse, Appended after It”

疎影橫斜月上時，蘭薰露盥寫烏絲

Dappled shadows cross and lean at the time of the moon climbing up.
Scented with orchid blossoms and bathed with dewdrops before she wrote on
paper lined with black ink.¹²⁵

怪君齒頰生香氣，不讀梅花以外詩

No wonder your teeth and cheeks grow fragrant;
Do not read poems other than those on plum blossoms.¹²⁶

In the title of this poem, Sun Yuanxiang reveals an intimate moment between a companionate couple engaged in a literary activity. Echoing the poem in which Sun states that they share the same reading materials in the inner chamber, this verse provides more specific evidence of the enjoyment they shared at night. Additionally, this poem interestingly resonates with the poem in which Xi Peilan urges her husband to stop reading; both poems depict their observation of certain daily details about each other. In the first couplet, Sun moves his focus from outside into the inner space. He first describes the night scene viewed through the window—the charming position and shadows under the moonlight in the garden.¹²⁷ From a direct quotation of the famous poetic line by Lin

¹²⁴ *Suoxiao ji* was written by Yang Shikong 楊師孔 (1570–1630) and published around 1621–27. Yang had an informal prose piece recording his experience of viewing plum blossoms at Mount Fahua 法華, and directly began with “I greatly love viewing and appreciating plum blossoms.” Yang explains in the preface to the collection that poems in this work are inspired by the plum tree in the garden of his office. See Yang Shikong, “Fahua shan kanmei ji” 法華山看梅記, quoted in Wu Bentai 吳本泰 (1573–?), *Xixi fanyin zhi* 西溪梵隱志, in Ding Bing 丁丙 (1832–99), comp., *Wulin zhanggu congbian* 武林掌故叢編 p. 39a. Retrieved from Chinese Text Project, <http://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&file=83225&page=113&remap=gb>. Yang Shikong, “*Suoxiao ji* xiaoxu” 索笑集小序, in *Suoxiao ji*, in Yang Shikong, *Xiaoyetang ji* 秀野堂集 (printed 1621–27), pp. 2b–3b.

¹²⁵ “Wusi” is a shorter form of “wusilan” 烏絲闌. Originally, this term referred to silk that is woven in black threads to form columns and used red ink to divide the lines. Later, it also referred to paper with black ink columns.

¹²⁶ Sun Yuanxiang, “Neiren chao *Suoxiao ji* cheng xi shu qihou,” in *Tianzhen’ge ji*, p. 89.

¹²⁷ Plum blossoms and plum trees make up a great portion of Sun Yuanxiang’s works including paintings, poetry, and inscriptions on paintings. Additionally, he penned several verses about purposefully visiting plum trees. He also clearly stated his strong preference: “In my whole life, I have loved nothing but the moon and plum blossoms” 平生百無愛，所愛月與梅，and “It is not necessarily true that other people and I are alike; only I am fond of this kind of flower” 未必人如我，鍾情只此花。 He even stated that for a year

Bu 林逋 (967–1028) about plum blossoms—“Dappled shadows cross and lean into each other, reflecting onto clear and shallow water” 疏影橫斜水清淺—¹²⁸it is clear that the writer is referring to plum trees. Based on this, plum blossoms become an underlying flow throughout the whole poem. Plum blossoms mix the qualities of sensuality and purity in the author’s depictions. On the one hand, the aroma triggers the bodily intimacy between husband and wife, while on the other hand, the elegance and purity of the blossoms symbolize characteristics of his beloved wife. Meanwhile, the loftiness that plum blossoms represent also call attention to Xi Peilan’s extraordinary taste in poetry.

Moving into the domestic space, Sun Yuanxiang shifts the viewpoint onto his wife. Through his scrutiny, readers would witness the link between outside and inner space as Xi Peilan uses natural elements to enhance and purify her literary activity. Additionally, Sun implicitly connects Xi to Qu Yuan 屈原 (353 B.C.E– 277 B.C.E), the pioneer of making analogies between one’s integrity and aromatic herbs, to suggest her morality. On top of this, in his description, copying is a serious and careful ritual for his wife; the writer portrays his wife as truly devoted to the poetic collection and capable of appreciating the profound meaning of these poems on plum blossoms. More importantly, the author adopts a humorous tone to reveal their affection. They are so close that Sun Yuanxiang is able to smell the fragrance, which he playfully attributes to poems on plum blossoms that she reads, on her body. Also, on account of Sun’s personal craze for plum

he imagined himself as a butterfly living in a plum flower, and he said that because of inherited talents, he was unable to draw other things except for plum blossoms. He indicated in some poetic titles that there were plum trees in his garden (tingmei 庭梅). See Sun Yuanxiang, *Tianzhenge ji*, pp. 60, 180, 193, 253–54, 260.

¹²⁸ Lin Bu, “Shanyuan xiao mei ershou (qiyi)” 山園小梅二首(其一), in *Quan Songshi 全宋詩*, eds. Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮 et al. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2nd edition, 1995), pp. 1217–18.

blossoms, associating them to Xi Peilan suggests his fondness for his spouse and their unspoken intimacy.

The author applies the erotic style to describing his own marital relationship. Interestingly, though Sun Yuanxiang beholds his wife from the stance of a male gaze, Xi Peilan, as a talented woman, in Sun's depiction, possesses a quite distinctive, active, and strong personality. She has not only her literary ability, knowledge, and devotion but also exceptional literary taste. Furthermore, this poem forms an interesting resonance with Xi Peilan's poem discussed below; in their poems, they both closely observe their spouses in the inner chamber. The two verses clearly display screenshots of their daily life—literary activities are their common activities and entertainments at night.

From the view of the other side, evening is also a great time for them to spend together. Xi's poem reads:

夏夜示外 “Summer Night, Presenting this Piece to My Husband”¹²⁹
 夜深衣薄露華凝，屢欲催眠恐未應
 The night is late, clothes are thin, and drops of dew congeal,
 Often, I desired to urge you to sleep, but feared you would not respond.
 恰有天風解人意，窗前吹滅讀書燈
 Fortunately, by coincidence a wind from Heaven understood human's mind,
 And blew out the lamp for reading in front of the window.

In this quatrain, Xi Peilan presents herself as a considerate and loving spouse. Although it is about a summer night, the opening line conveys a chilly atmosphere in a deep night, the congealing of dewdrops, and the moonlight. Situated in the environment, she inevitably worries that her husband in his thin clothes will be invaded by the coolness, especially since Sun Yuanxiang seemed to be prone to be sick. Similarly, on account of

¹²⁹ The translation is based on that of Wilt Idema and Beata Grant. See *The Red Brush*, p. 608.

her deep regard, her virtuous image emerges. Also, it can be presumed that her husband has been studying for a long time until late night. According to Sun Yuanxiang's own poetic work, he used to be troubled with blurred vision. As a thoughtful wife, Peilan was responsible for taking care of his health and so planned to call him to bed. However, at the same time, she displayed a full understanding of her partner, who would not answer due to his diligence. The author then made a humorous transition; the sudden interruption resulted in surprise at the current situation and also astutely created a playful tone in the verse. More interestingly, following its composition, Xi Peilan showed this poem to her husband. Not only did she reinforce the message of reminding Sun to take care of his health, but she also expressed their closeness through presenting her "complaint" to her husband.

In a slightly different manner from the verse above, Xi Peilan in the following poem captures an adorable moment on a leisurely summer afternoon. Presumably, this would be a perfect time for them to start poetic compositions. Within the literary activity, the couple displays an interesting interaction, which fully presents their close relationship:

長夏同外(其一) "With My Husband on a Long Summer Day (first one)"
 長日如年睡起遲, 綠窗風軟裊晴絲
 The long daytime felt like a year; I woke up late;
 Outside of the green windows,¹³⁰ the breeze was soft and threads of gossamer
 were gleaming and floating sinuously in the sun.
 吟成故故催人和, 半晌停鍼不語時
 You completed a verse and repeatedly urged me to match the rhymes;
 While I am stopping the needle, not speaking for a considerable time.¹³¹

This quatrain starts in a typical erotic style. The first scene displays the protagonist,

¹³⁰ This term originally refers to windows with green gauze; it becomes a metonymy of women's chambers. It is a highly gendered phrase. For more details about its gender meanings, see Xiaorong Li's work. Xiaorong Li, *Women's Poetry of Late Imperial China*, pp. 20–51.

¹³¹ Xi Peilan, "Changxia tong wai," in *Changzhen'ge ji*, p. 623.

namely Xi Peilan herself, in a lazy pose. Although the author does not reveal many details but speaks only of a lady getting up from sleep, the gesture still connotes rich hints of sensuality through the indications of lateness and laziness. While the viewpoint then moves towards the outside, the scenery the woman poet portrays is still situated in a warm and soft atmosphere. The winds bring about the connotation of a gentle touch and the silks of gossamer convey a clear association of thoughts of affection and fondness. However, in the latter half of the poem, Xi Peilan does not continue the erotic style but shifts to descriptions of their daily life. She presents their harmonious relationship and close mutual interactions by means of frequent urges and poetic exchanges. Meanwhile, the silent moment could be because of their pausing in chatting to consider whether to accept the request, or contemplating how to match a verse or a line. Additionally, in her implied depiction, Sun Yuanxiang is represented as a bit childish but really quite zealous about poetic composition. At the same time, Xi not only represents herself as a devoted and meticulous poet, but also reflects her diligent characteristics as a virtuous wife who has not neglected her needlework. She therefore becomes an embodiment of the combination of talented woman and virtuous spouse.

Likewise, nighttime is also a precious time for getting together for Xu Can and Chen Zhilin. In one of Xu Can's verses, she records the pleasure of reading and drinking together in their studio or inner chamber after midnight. The poem reads:

雪夜偶成 “By Chance I Composed this Verse on a Snowy Night”
 共展囊書夜未休，薄寒初透竹間樓
 Together we opened the memorial in the pocket¹³² while night had not yet
 rested;
 A slight coolness just penetrated into the tower amid the bamboo grove.

¹³² In the past, when bureaucrats offered their suggestions to emperors, they would put memorials into sealed black pockets in order to prevent the contents from leaking. This term could also simply refer to books in a sack.

殷勤且盡葡萄釀，味爽鳴珂紫陌頭

I sincerely urged you for the moment to drink down the grape wine;
In the blurry dark approaching the dawn, you would ring the jade on the
horse¹³³ by the road on the outskirts of the capital.¹³⁴

The poetess depicts an indoor scene with dark surroundings and the spotlight cast on the room by a lamp for reading. Bathed in the candlelight, two figures accompany each other reading the same material, which could refer to the memorial that Chen is going to present to the emperor the next day, or simply to books they own or their spending time together. They stay up late until feeling the invasion of the cold from outside into their semi-secluded, warm, and intimate space. To resist the chill, out of concern and sincerity, Xu Can urges her husband to drink some wine. This could also stem from considerations of going to bed earlier before leaving for the court the next day. The second couplet reminds its readers of the image of a virtuous wife waking her husband to go to work from the *Shijing*,¹³⁵ this virtuous wife then completely matches the author. In addition, from the description, she presents her husband as a successful and diligent official. At the same time, obviously, they are jointly involved in literary activity; Xu Can may even be engaged in the discussion of the memorial Chen is outlining.

The intimacy and enjoyment that they share through literary activities are also attested by the preface to Xu Can's collected lyrics by Chen Zhilin. In this preface, Chen recollects the old residence and particularly records the silk-tree ("Hehuan" 合歡) in the backyard. The original connotation, which means harmonious joy especially between men and women, or sexual intimacy, contained in the name of the tree, strengthens the

¹³³ Horses that eminent people ride would be ornamented with jade, and which would ring while moving.

¹³⁴ Xu Can, "Xueye oucheng," in *Zhuozhengyuan shiji*, p. 571.

¹³⁵ It could associate with "Jiming" 雞鳴 in the *Shijing*. See Ruan Yuan, ed., *Maoshi zhushu*, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, vol. 2, pp. 187b–89a.

association with spousal relationships. Chen remembers, “In front of the pavilion, there was a silk tree, which was verdant and exuberant. Every two leaves faced each other; they covered over each other and would open up until the verge of dawn. In the summer it would blossom with flowers like red silks. Xiangping and I drank and composed [poetry] under it, experiencing several summers and winters. During our leisure time, [we] ascended the small hill on the right side of the pavilion to see the colors of the clouds [surrounding] the West Mountain that were different in form between day and evening. At that time, in our teaching positions we had much free time. When going out, [I] have the joy of [gathering with] friends, and when entering the inner chamber, [I] have amusements [with my wife]” 亭前合歡樹一株，青翠扶蘇，葉葉相對，夜則交斂，侵晨乃舒，夏月吐華如朱絲。余與湘蘋觴詠其下，再歷寒暑。閒登亭右小邱，望西山雲物，朝夕殊態。時史席多暇，出有朋友之樂，入有闈房之娛。¹³⁶ The silk tree here becomes a symbol of their harmonious marriage as well as the sweet past filled with enjoyable literary activities and short trips in each other’s company. Chen Zhilin parallels his friendships in the public realm with the domestic interactions that perfectly demonstrate the elevation of the importance of companionate relationship in male literati’s life. Additionally, Chen in his poem on this tree indicates the meaning to himself: “Wurong ties the same hearts; Maying pacifies the long journey” 烏絨結同心，馬纓綏遠行。¹³⁷ In the south, the silk tree was also called “wurong,” which literally means black woolen, while “maying flower,” gotten this name due to its similar shape to bridle rein, is another name of silk tree that was prevalent in the north. He plays with the

¹³⁶ Chen Zhilin, “Zhuozhengyuan shiyu xu,” in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*, p. 576.

¹³⁷ Chen Zhilin, “Hehuan shu” 合歡樹, in *Fuyun ji*, p. 16.

different names of the silk tree and links them with his life. The bridle rein could make long-distance trips safe. The woolen ties were the shape of a knot of kindred heart, which symbolized loyalty in romantic love and revealed his own wish. As Wai-sin Tsang 曾惠仙 has pointed out, every time that Xu Can mentions the silk-tree in her works, their sweet memories about appreciating the sunset and composing poetry usually follow. Thus, this silk tree served as the epitome of their close conjugal relationship and delighted life living in the capital.¹³⁸

Unlike the two pairs mentioned above, owing to an objection from the mother, Ye Shaoyuan and Shen Yixiu do not have many chances to spend the nighttime reading and writing together. Furthermore, the collected works by Ye Shaoyuan are not extant. In addition to verses included in *Wumengtang ji*, our understanding of their marital life as well as their interactions come mainly from her biography and the funeral eulogy penned by her husband.

In elegiac prose, Ye Shaoyuan indicates that “‘You’ and ‘I’, in the ethical form of relationships, belong to husband and wife, [but our] harmonious match is also like friends” 我之與君，倫則夫婦，契兼朋友。¹³⁹ He mentions that they can talk about everything ranging from happiness and jokes to depression, poverty, and philosophical ideas. Ye then also quotes Li Mengyang’s 李夢陽 words, which express his heartfelt feelings exactly, saying that something that he found hard to tell others he would share with his wife. Yet, when she entered the netherworld, he lost someone to chat with. Echoing this quotation, when Ye Shaoyuan recollects the comfort and encouragement

¹³⁸ Wai-sin Tsang, “Xu Can zuopin zhong de fuqi zhiqing tanxi” 徐燦作品中的夫妻之情探析, *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiusuo xuebao* 中國文化研究所學報 49 (2009): 256–57.

¹³⁹ Ye Shaoyuan, “Bairi ji wangshi Shen anren wen” 百日祭亡室沈安人文, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 211.

that Shen Yixiu offered him regarding their impoverished situation, he is suddenly struck by the sadness that there is no one similar to his wife able to talk with him about poverty. Additionally, in his memory, they could not only appreciate beautiful seasonal scenery and enjoy life as hermits, but also read the same texts and find marvelous things in books from previous dynasties, comparing the differences between editions.¹⁴⁰

Also, besides praising Shen Yixiu's elegant and beautiful poetic style, Ye recalls a shared memory with his wife about her literary project: During the mid-autumn festival, Yixiu raised the box for storing poems and told Shaoyuan that they luckily could be published. Ye replied that this could wait until she recovered from her sickness; she would call the collection "The Manuscript of Recovery after Sickness." Shen also happily accepted the suggestion.¹⁴¹ Evidently, Ye Shaoyuan fully engaged in his wife's literary activity, and presumably, he also took charge of matters of publication. Ye indicates that Shen Yixiu was involved in his preparation for the civil service exam, too; she helped him to transcribe the classics he was studying, which were the textual sources of the examinations, and the elegance of her calligraphy won appreciation among Shaoyuan's friends. Interestingly, this was not an exclusive practice between Ye Shaoyuan and Shen Yixiu, but also practiced between Shaoyuan's cousin and cousin's wife.¹⁴² Both of the two brothers not only shared the manuscripts with each other but also deemed the other's company as a pure pleasure in his life.

Beyond applauding Shen Yixiu's literary talents and wifely virtues, Ye Shaoyuan as an advocate for the reconsideration of beauty as among the womanly virtues does not

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*; Ye Shaoyuan, "Wangshi Shen anren zhuan" 亡室沈安人傳, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 228.

¹⁴¹ Ye Shaoyuan, "Bairi ji wangshi Shen anren wen," in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 213.

¹⁴² Ye Shaoyuan, "Wangshi Shen anren zhuan," in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 226.

hesitate to extol her good looks. In his description, Shen Yixiu not only takes meticulous cares for the cleanness of her appearance but also hardly wears heavy make-up and precious ornaments.¹⁴³ Even when attending a gathering of her female friends, she would only wear light makeup and plain clothes. However, she possessed her own natural beauty: she had “bushy eyebrows and elegant eyes; her figure is tall and her shape is slender” 濃眉秀目，長身弱骨。¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, in Ye Shaoyuan’s self-written and self-edited *nianpu* 年譜 (chronological biography), he records her gorgeousness when she was a newlywed bride. In his remembrance, her gentleness and goodness flourished, and her delicate appearance and skin started to shine out an aura of glory.¹⁴⁵ From her figure, clothing, and makeup, Ye Shaoyuan makes a close observation while projecting his gaze onto his wife.

Although Ye states that his mother was satisfied with her daughter-in-law, in his narrative,¹⁴⁶ he insinuates that his mother created certain impediments in their intimate spousal relationship. He reveals his perplexity and difficulty in choosing either side between mother and wife. Ye also lost his father when he was young. As the only son, his mother not only taught him strict discipline but also placed all the family’s hopes on his shoulders. Shaoyuan records some anecdotes illustrating the great pressure that his mother put them under and her interference in their conjugal interactions. A friend of Ye planned to buy a house but was short of money; the friend secretly asked Shaoyuan for funds. Ye replied, “My mother is strict; I do not dare to mention [the topic.] I should

¹⁴³ Ye Shaoyuan, “Bairi ji wangshi Shen anren wen,” in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 228.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Ye Shaoyuan, *Ye Tianliao zizhuan nianpu* 葉天寥自撰年譜, in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 827.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

discuss it with [your] brother's wife" 我母嚴，我弗敢言，當謀諸婦耳。¹⁴⁷ When Shaoyuan tried to speak about the issue to Shen Yixiu, she immediately sold her precious belongings to offer her help. The pressure on the couple was felt not only financially but also in terms of the marital relationship. Ye Shaoyuan candidly states that he rarely stayed at home owing to his studies. Yet, even when staying at home, he would not dare to enter the inner chamber by himself without the approval of his mother. Otherwise, he would sleep alone in the study room.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, her mother-in-law also exerted control over Shen Yixiu. As with Shaoyuan, not until her mother agreed to her stopping her embroidery for the day could Shen could enter the bedroom.¹⁴⁹

More importantly, Ye's mother disliked Shen's poetic compositions and the possibility of matching rhymed verses with Shaoyuan, which she regarded as distracting Shaoyuan from his studies. Ye's mother would order a maid to spy on her to find out whether or not Shen had penned a poem. Because of this, Shen Yixiu often wept for the opposition and invested more energy in transcribing the materials on the exam for her husband as well as exploring Buddhist philosophy.¹⁵⁰ Ye Shaoyuan candidly states that their feelings of respect mingled with fear towards his mother lasted for thirty years.¹⁵¹ Presumably, the pressure on Shen Yixiu, who was the care provider and daughter-in-law, would be greater than that on her husband. Obstructions from a parent are one of the reasons for the lack of extant matching verses in *Wumengtang ji*. Ye Shaoyuan also mentions his dilemma: "How could the wifely virtues and parental heart be coordinated

¹⁴⁷ Ye Shaiyuan, "Wangshi Shen anren zhuan," in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 226.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

with each other” 婦道親心，豈能兩協。¹⁵² He expresses his understanding of Yixiu’s difficulty and his feeling of being wronged. Even though he understood her feelings partially, he could not verbalize them at all. Considering that this relates to his mother, the rules of filial piety would dictate that he refrain from criticizing her. The reaction of Shen’s mother-in-law to harmoniously rhymed poetic writing manifest the anxiety about the influence on close conjugal relationships of the family as well as the career of a male literati.

Unlike the other targeted couples, Yihui and Taiqing not only had no experience of impoverishment in their marital life, but also dated before marriage for a period of time closer to modern patterns before getting married. Taiqing met Yihui as the teacher of the inner chamber of Yihui’s sisters in the family mansion. Their affection grew from poetic exchanges in groups. The compiler of Yihui and Taiqing’s *nianpu*, Zhang Zhang 張璋, indicates that one of Yihui’s collected lyrics, titled “xiechun” 寫春 (portrayal of spring), suggests a relationship to his romantic experiences with Taiqing, whose given name was chun.¹⁵³ Zhang also attributes a series of nine lyrics from Yihui, with a self-annotation as “wuti” 無題 (untitled lyrics), in this collection to their premarital love.¹⁵⁴ Those lyrics vividly depict the deep yearning of the author for a talented beauty who is gorgeous like a fairy; they express their affection through delicate embroidery and poetry. More importantly, the lyrics reveal the pleasure and pain of needing to carefully conceal their relationship—not only did their verses need to use word puns, but also their meetings had

¹⁵² Ye Shaoyuan, “Bairi ji wangshi Shen anren wen,” in *Wumengtang ji*, p. 209.

¹⁵³ Zhang Zhang, “Gu Taiqing Yihui nianpu jianbian” 顧太清奕繪年譜簡編, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 726

¹⁵⁴ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Wuti jiushou” 無題九首, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, pp. 410–12.

to be clandestine, and they had to pretend to avoid each other, holding hands behind each others' backs. He in addition gives graphic descriptions of the mixed feeling of shyness, excitement, and hesitation. On account of the origins of the title "untitled" in Li Shangyin's 李商隱 (813–58) works, selecting this term has the connotation of romantic reminiscence, which contains the descriptions in the poem of the tryst. However, there is no obvious evidence for readers to ascertain the addressee. Additionally, not every lyric in the series has a relatively apparent clue indicating the love affair of the author, especially the last two lyrics which are about missing an anonymous deceased lady, who is more likely to be an imaginary figure rather than Yihui's wives. The protagonist in the series is more likely to be a fictional addressee based on some set of actual experiences of the poet. A few years later, they finally united in matrimony after overcoming various difficulties. Yihui recalled their romantic past when inscribing a *ci* on the wall of the studio storing their book collections in their villa. The name of the studio later also became the title of Taiqing's collected poetic works. The poem reads:

浣溪紗：題天游閣三首(其二) To the tune: "Washing Gauze in a Brook:
Three Verses Inscribed on 'Roaming the Heaven Studio'" (the second one)¹⁵⁵
此日天游閣裡人，當年遍嘗苦酸辛。

The person in "Roaming the Heavenly Studio" today thoroughly tasted bitter difficulties in these past years.

訂交猶記甲申春。

I still remember that we pledged our relationship in the spring of Jiashen year.

曠劫因緣成眷屬，半生詞賦損精神。

Fate rooted in the extremely distant past¹⁵⁶ allowed us to become husband and wife; Composing verses for half of a life corrodes the spirit.

相看俱是夢中身。

Looking at each other, we are both bodies in dreams.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Aixinjueluo Yihui, To the tune: "Huanxisha: ti Tianyuoke sanshou (qi'er)," in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 655.

¹⁵⁶ In Buddhism, "jie" 劫 (*kalpa* in Sanskrit) denotes an extreme length of time; "Kuang" 曠 means remote or distant. The term then indicates the extremely remote past.

¹⁵⁷ Zhuangzi regarded death as a great awakening and life as a great dream. In another Daoist classic,

In the first piece of this series, Yihui describes the towering appearance of the building and its uses. He says that he plans to discuss Buddhist philosophy, compose poetry, and brew alcohol. The author then turns to a person inside the building, namely his spouse, and their relationship here. As her husband, Yihui empathizes with the adversities that Taiqing experienced before they met owing to her lowered family background; her family also was the cause of the objection to their marriage raised by his renowned parents which forms a part of the predicaments they face. Their hard-earned happiness makes the remembrance of their wedding, which finally took place in the jiashen year (1824), so vivid in his head. Yihui then parallels the importance of poetry to their predestined fate. On the one hand, poetry serves as the sole means of communication to express their mutual admiration, affection, and the annoyance and distress that festered in their minds during their premarital period. On the other hand, the poet directly associates poetic composition with spiritual exhaustion and even the possibly resulting sickness, in line with the contemporary trend. Additionally, Yihui reveals that they spend much of their lives as well as efforts improving their poetic skills together. Having gone through so many hardships, they look at each other and find that being able to be together now feels hard to believe, like a dream. Also, by applying the Daoist idea that life may be regarded as like a great dream, the poet suggests that past predicament may now be seen as illusions. Most importantly, they are still in the same dream.

For their studio, Yihui and Gu Taiqing also both wrote another series of four poems

Guanyinzi 關尹子, mentions that humans should “understand that bodies are like bodies in dreams. When following what the inner emotions appear to be, it could make the spirits soar to be roaming the ultimate clearness” 知夫此身, 如夢中身, 隨情所見者, 可以飛神作我而遊太清. See Yin Xi 尹喜 (?), *Guanyinzi*, in *Sibu beiyao* 四部備要 (Taipei: Taiwan Zhonghua shuju, 1981), p. 24.

in harmonious rhymes.¹⁵⁸ Yihui mentions that they have witnessed lotus blossoms bloom 36 times and are both getting older. Since time is so precious, he encourages himself and his beloved to utilize it well in reading, meditation, and cultivation in the Buddhist and Daoist way. More importantly, Yihui states that “Deeply pleased that your taste in reading is the same as mine. In teaching our children, we should eventually consider their talents” 讀書深喜同吾好，教子終當量彼才。¹⁵⁹ As a spouse, he points out that they clearly share the same interests, while he discusses with his wife how as parents they can best educate their descendants. In addition to corresponding to Yihui’s ideas about the fleeing time as well as the need to put efforts into self-cultivation, Gu Taiqing in her reply highlights that “serving you with the utmost propriety is fundamentally not because of adulation; converting to the Way with a whole heart makes me delighted at being gradually enlightened” 事君盡禮原非諂，入道深心喜漸開。¹⁶⁰ The poetess suggests that out of love and obligation, she is completely willing to serve her husband meticulously and compliantly. Furthermore, she expresses her gratitude and appreciation for the guidance that Yihui offers on both religious philosophy and literary skills.

Besides their romantic encounter and then marriage, compared with the other three couples, Yihui and Taiqing also spent much more time together. Additionally, the high prolificacy of both Yihui and Taiqing and the quality of their autobiography and chronologically ordered collected poetry provide considerable revelation of their daily life. Interestingly, due to the prevalent gender norms, many of their poems do not

¹⁵⁸ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Tianyouge huihuanyin sishou shi Tiaqing” 天游閣迴環吟四首示太清, *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 550; Gu Taiqing, “Ci fuzi Tianyouge jianshi yun sishou” 次夫子天游閣見示韻四首, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, pp. 384–85.

¹⁵⁹ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Tianyouge huihuanyin sishou shi Tiaqing,” p. 550.

¹⁶⁰ Gu Taiqing, “Ci fuzi Tianyouge jianshi yun sishou,” in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 385.

mention details of their interactions but unveil the activities they participated in together that are identified in the poetic titles. As reconstructed from the titles, their joint activities varied from quiet indoor literary ones such as writing poetry and inscribing verses on paintings, to religious ones such as discussions of religious philosophy and religious gatherings, to practical matters in their common life such as planting flowers and salting vegetables, to outdoor entertainments including watching plays and taking short trips.

Among their poems, *yongwu* 詠物 poetry (poems on things) make up a large portion of their collections. They write about various things including animals such as cicadas, monkeys, and crows; plants such melons, fallen blossoms, and jasmine; and decorations such as pearl curtains, lamps with curving goose-feet stands, and decorative artificial paper flowers. The ample quantity of same-subject *yongwu* poems clearly shows not only their frequent poetic practices and exchanges but also their shared appreciation of those objects.

The poetic records also reveal that they had in succession two pugs. The first one they named Shuanghuan 雙鬟 and the second one Shuixian 水仙. Yihui describes the skin and the body of Shuanghuan as very soft and her disposition as always lively and nice.¹⁶¹ Yihui recollects the dog hiding into his sleeve to show its affection, and Taiqing recalls that Shuanghuan often wandered around her dressing mirror.¹⁶² Obviously, they were very close to Shuanghuan and treated her dotingly. Similarly, the poetess states that Shuixian not only would follow her closely wherever she went but also would sleep with

¹⁶¹ Aixinjueluo Yihui, To the tune: “Jinlüqu: Cuo Huan ming” 金縷曲：瘦鬟銘, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 689.

¹⁶² Gu Taiqing, To the tune: “Mantingfang: Cuo Huan ming” 滿庭芳：瘦鬟銘, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 545.

her at night.¹⁶³ Yihui's observation attests to the situation with his wife's work: "She follows her to the jade terrace, by the golden wine cups, and in front of the myriad flowers. The look when Shuixian holds a book in her mouth is as adorable" 玉臺金盞百花前，銜書一種可人憐。¹⁶⁴ Implicitly, in following the steps of Shuixian, Yihui is also projecting his gaze onto his wife. Moreover, in his self-annotation in the mourning *ci*, Yihui records an anecdote about Shuanghuan and Taiqing. When Shuanghuan was newly afflicted by the sickness, Taiqing got through divination the word "福" (fortune) for her condition. Everyone thought that this was a good sign, but only Taiqing regarded it as inauspicious. Taiqing explained that her reason was that in splitting the character it meant "indication of a small piece of a field," which would be the cemetery. In the story, Yihui expresses their affection for their dear pet in addition to Taiqing's unique opinion and accurate prophesying.¹⁶⁵

Furthermore, there are some objects that have special connotations of love tokens would evoke the couple's hopes for their relationship. Once they both composed poems on a pair of jade badgers.¹⁶⁶ Interestingly, in these poems Taiqing and Yihui take up different angles in portraying the creatures. Taiqing emphasizes the outer appearance of the jade with the two badgers connecting to each other via their arms and thighs. In light of this, she associates the appearance here with the relationship between the emperor and his officials as well as fathers and sons: when they can collaborate, they are as if arms

¹⁶³ Gu Taiqing, "Yong Shuixian woer" 詠水仙獨兒, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 216.

¹⁶⁴ Aixinjueluo Yihui, To the tune: "Huanxisha: yong Shuixian wozi" 浣溪紗：詠水仙獨子, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 692.

¹⁶⁵ Aixinjueluo Yihui, To the tune: "Jinlüqu: Cuo Huan ming," in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, pp. 688–89.

¹⁶⁶ Gu Taiqing, To the tune: "Changxiangsi: Yong shuanghuan pei" 長相思：詠雙獾佩, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 427; Aixinjueluo Yihui, To the tune: "Zuitaiping: xiyong shuanghuan pei" 醉太平：戲詠雙歡佩, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 664.

and thighs, and will feel peace of mind as well as being able to preserve their lives. Even though the poetess does not directly refer to particular figures, on account of her family background, she is conveying her concern and hope for the smoothness and success of her husband's career. For his part, Yihui focuses on the romantic connotations of this type of jade decoration. "The beauty borrows it to indicate the double happiness and to make a metaphor of being the same heart for hundreds of years" 玉人借作雙歡，喻同心百年。¹⁶⁷ Because of the namesake, this kind of jade decoration possesses an association with the delight of romantic love. Interestingly, the subject denotes not only a pretty woman but also a family member or beloved one. Based on this, Yihui extols Taiqing's appearance and literary wit and simultaneously voices her hope for their marriage to endure forever. More interestingly, in this pair of matching *ci*, they reverse the stereotyped gender norms that men tend to be more politicized and public-centered and women more sentimental and inward.

Religious activities also took up a large portion of the couple's life. They not only would often attend religious rituals held by their mutual Daoist friend, Zhang Kunhe 張坤鶴, but also personally practiced them in their own house, as Taiqing mentions in the birthday poem to her husband. Zhang was their closest Daoist friend. The couple frequently visited his temple to observe various religious activities, such as offering vegetarian food for common people and rituals of conversion.¹⁶⁸ In addition to attending

¹⁶⁷ Aixinjueluo Yihui, To the tune: "Zuitaiping: xiyong shuanghuan pei," in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 664.

¹⁶⁸ Aixinjueluo Yihui, "Yanjiu Baiyunguan guan fangzhai" 燕九白雲觀觀放齋, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 525; Gu Taiqing, "Ci fuzi yanjiu Baiyunguan guan fangzhai yuanyun" 次夫子燕九白雲觀觀放齋原韻, in *Gu Taiqing ji jianjiao*, p. 383; Aixinjueluo Yihui, "Siyue sanri Baiyunguan guanshou quanzhen daojie" 四月三日白雲觀觀授全真道戒,

activities at the Daoist temple where Zhang Kunhe presided, Yihui and Taiqing engaged in practices of religious meditation and discussed the essence of the classics at home, too. As Susan Mann has indicated, religious practices were prevalent among gentry women; meditation and other religious activities were considered capable of bringing a sense of peace and relieving pressure. Dorothy Ko points out that male literati sometimes joined the religious cultivation activities of their educated wives, usually by means of discussion of the doctrines.¹⁶⁹ Taiqing records in her short preface to a *ci*¹⁷⁰ about a deliberation with Yihui on religious texts until the middle of a winter night. In the sketch, they are too devoted to notice the passing of time, and coincidentally, the pot-planted plum blossoms giving off some scents provoke her enlightened perspective on the cycles of the universe. As the conclusion of the lyric, the author states that all of the myriad things in the world could serve her as guiding mentors. From this, we can infer that her husband, who explicates the Way to her, is undoubtedly one of these mentors. More importantly, the coldness of late night, the fragrance of plum flowers, the cozy inner chamber, and the enthusiasm in talking together all create an intimate atmosphere. For this couple, religious cultivation and spousal intimacy are intertwined. Thus, Taiqing is able to ask, in one of her poems discussing immortality, “At what time can I leave the burdens of the mundane world? Hopefully, I can lightly rise heavenwards as an immortal following my husband” 何時謝塵累，輕舉隨夫君。¹⁷¹ It is apparent that the purpose of her religious cultivation is on the one hand to extricate herself from obligations in the secular world

¹⁶⁹ Susan Mann, *Precious records*, p. 182; Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p. 199.

¹⁷⁰ Gu Taiqing, To the tune: “Zhegutian: dongye ting fuzi lundao, bujue lou xia san yi. Penzhong canmei xiangfa, youwu fuci” 鷓鴣天：冬夜聽夫子論道，不覺漏下三矣。盆中殘梅香發，有悟賦此，in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 485.

¹⁷¹ Gu Taiqing, “Youxian yishou” 游仙一首，in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 375.

and to continue their spousal relationship in the heavenly realm, on the other. Religious practices not only provided gentry women with opportunities to go out, which gradually troubled officials as signs of the decline of the gender order, but also serve as opportunities and catalysts in the marital relationships of companionate couples. Whether in the public sphere or domestic space, religious activities were hidden subversive factors in relation to the gender norms.

In addition to attending religious gatherings, which provided a legitimate reason for gentry women to step out of their boudoirs, Yihui and Taiqing often traveled together to their villa as well as to some scenic spots. Taiqing clearly says that when encountering attractive scenes, she would leave poetic lines, and facing branches with blossoms, and would spend ink on drawing. She also self-annotates that she has the disposition to enjoy sightseeing and knows something about painting.¹⁷² Her interest is fully understood by Yihui, who would arrange trips in advance and hoped that Taiqing would not decline the appointment.¹⁷³ Considering frequent activities such as viewing flowers and going boating with Taiqing and her female friends, this suggests that she kept busy with a tight daily schedule. Additionally, in the poem on visiting Mimuo 秘魔 Cliff, a famous rock near Beijing, Yihui mentions that they read the inscription on the wall of the cave underneath the rock. He concludes his description of this experience by commenting, “Sharing nice poetic lines with wife and children” 佳句妻孥共.¹⁷⁴ This refers not only to the original author of the inscription, Zhiyan 芝巖, who actually composed the poem

¹⁷² Gu Taiqing, “Shengri” 生日, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 189.

¹⁷³ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Eryue shiri yu tong Taiqing zuo” 二月十日雨同太清作, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 595.

¹⁷⁴ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Youshan liuzhang zhang liuju” 游山六章章六句, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, pp. 598–99.

with his wife, but also to Yihui himself as being with Taiqing reading and sharing the beautiful inscription. It also suggests that they would share the present verse that Yihui had just composed as well as, presumably, other poetic works.

When Yihui makes an appointment with the guard of their villa while it is in the process of construction, he indicates that “the person at home is fond of ascending and viewing the scenery on high” 家人喜登覽, and in addition he playfully describes Taiqing’s excitement at a future tour of the villa and her looking forward to using her newly-made saddle. In the following piece, Yihui again describes themselves as an immortal couple traveling together.¹⁷⁵ In light of this, he conveys his understanding of her hobby and her enjoyment in exploring splendid spring scenery. Echoing her husband’s poem, Taiqing states that she would compose verses to be delivered on the occasion of beautiful scenery, but had to wait while she prepared the saddle for travel.¹⁷⁶ The preparation of riding equipment is not merely poetic rhetoric but reflects the realities of traveling. Taiqing records in the title of a poem that they rode side by side crossing the Ci 慈 Creek, and brought back a remnant of a Tang dynasty stone stele. Yihui in his matching verse describes their two horses startling flying mandarin ducks. Taiqing immediately comes up with a *ci* about this, and they together gallop by the stony shore, reaching a scenic point and eventually obtaining the precious antique they were seeking.¹⁷⁷ The scenes that the couple pictures are full of the connotations of spousal

¹⁷⁵ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Chunri yi Nangu ji Eketuo qie ding youshan zhiqi sanshou” 春日憶南谷寄鄂克陀且訂游山之期三首, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 618

¹⁷⁶ Gu Taiqing, “Chunri yi Nangu ci fuzi yun” 春日憶南谷次夫子韻, *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, pp. 194–95.

¹⁷⁷ Gu Taiqing, “Chunyou shishou (qi'er): niansi tong fuzi lianji du Cixi. you Wanxiutang, guan Kongshui, de Kaiyuan keshi yi, Wujun Lu Xiang keshi yi, sui yi shijin yi yu shanseng zaigui er Dali bei yi bufu du yi” 春游十首 (其二): 廿四同夫子聯騎渡慈溪. 游萬佛堂, 觀孔水, 得開元刻石一, 吳郡盧襄刻詩一, 遂以十金易於山僧, 載歸而大歷碑已不復觀矣, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 150; Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Niansi tong Taiqing lianji you Shitang, guan Kongshui, de Kaiyuan zanjie yi Wujun Lu Xiang shijie yi zaigui er

intimacy and display their shared interest in travel and relics. Meanwhile, Taiqing's horseback riding demonstrates one of the Manchu traditions that the Qing court promoted to preserve and maintain its ethnic identity. In addition to the enjoyment of equitation that set Yihui and Taiqing apart from the other couples, the custom of unbound feet among Manchu women enabled Taiqing to enjoy higher mobility in her journeys than Han gentry women, who were in certain ways restricted by this.¹⁷⁸

Among many trips, poems about going to a villa, including a cemetery, that Yihui personally designed often discuss their future plans. Yihui came up with the idea of building a villa including tombs for them when they were both thirty-six, and paying a visit to the Tiantai 天台 Temple located in the Da'nán ravine 大南峪 on the outskirts of Beijing. For the construction, Yihui drew his ten-year salary in advance for the expenses and appointed two guards from his mansion as supervisors.¹⁷⁹ On top of this, according to Taiqing's record, he not only laid out all of the spots in the villa considering the geographical features of the valley, but also designed all of the railings and window lattices himself.¹⁸⁰ Yihui also clearly announced that he intended to store a second copy of his own works in a natural cave on the south side of the ravine.¹⁸¹ Undoubtedly, Yihui was making painstaking efforts on this building project, which he intended for various

Dali bei yi bufu du yi. fushi ershou” 廿四同太清聯騎游石堂，觀孔水，得開元殘碣一，吳郡盧襄詩碣一載歸，而大歷碑已不復睹矣。賦詩二首，in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 596; Gu Taiqing, To the tune: “Langtaosha: Chunri tong fuzi you Shitang, hui jing Cixi, jian yuanyang wushu, mashang cheng xiaoling” 浪淘沙：春日同夫子游石堂，回經慈溪，見鴛鴦無數，馬上成小令，in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 496.

¹⁷⁸ More details about the spirits of the Manchu way and the customs of Manchu women, see Mark C. Elliot, *The Manchu Way*, pp. 8–13; 246–47.

¹⁷⁹ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Jiefeng ji'en zhikui shi” 借俸紀恩誌愧詩，in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 550; “Nangu qizhang zhang shiba ju” 南谷七章章十八句，in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 551–52.

¹⁸⁰ Gu Taiqing, “Qiyue qiri xianfuzi xiaoxiang, shuai si ernü gongye Nan'gu, tong cheng erlü” 七月七日先夫子小祥，率四兒女恭謁南谷，痛成二律，in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 241.

¹⁸¹ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Nangu qizhang zhang shiba ju,” in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 551.

uses. Yihui once mockingly said to himself that his life was occupied with too many things, and he even commenced the arrangement of their afterlives in his middle-age.¹⁸² Yet, Taiqing comforted her husband that the studio they resided in in the villa could make him feel relaxed through its attractive scenery and environment of reclusion. The poetess herself envisions their future, saying, “Twenty years later, when we have less family matters, let’s accompany each other roaming this place together” 後二十年家事少，相隨此地共遨遊。¹⁸³ Clearly, she was expecting that in their later years they could indulge themselves in the pleasure of traveling together; Yihui was her best companion. Unfortunately, this wish was not realized. The construction of the villa went on for five years and ceased in incompleteness owing to Yihui’s death. Although Yihui had planned to include the cemetery within the villa area, it is more like a garden for retreat than a necropolis. It does not follow imperial regulations for tombs; as a result, the legitimate son of Yihui tore down some of the buildings in order to fulfill the requirements. Nonetheless, in Taiqing’s opinion, the action of partial demolition resulted in the destruction of her sweet memories as well as marking a sharp contrast between past and present. This contrast is the dominant motif of Taiqing’s poems of mourning, which I discussed in chapter one. Since a part of the villa would also be their graveyard, they would sometimes talk about their prospective deaths when going there. Yihui in his first poem on staying overnight in the Da’nan ravine reveals that he “intends to choose a green mountain to bury my wife. Some other year afterwards, trees growing out of the coffin pit

¹⁸² Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Nianwu su Nan’gu Qingfengge (qisi)” 廿五宿南谷清風閣 (其四), in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 580.

¹⁸³ Gu Taiqing, “Ti Nan’gu Qingfengge ci fuzi yun” 題南谷清風閣次夫子韻, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 117.

entombing us together¹⁸⁴ will interlace their branches¹⁸⁵ 擬卜青山埋內子，他年同穴樹交枝。¹⁸⁶ In addition, in his detailed plan, he even maintains that consulting with a diviner to find a good locale having the supernatural power to aid their progeny in ascending the throne is needless. The burial was meant solely to completely exhaust their affection as husband and wife, not for the prosperity of the descendants.¹⁸⁷ One month after Yihui's first visit, in the poem about traveling to the valley, Taiqing states that she points to the intended location of burial with a smile and says that her final destination will be in the piles of clouds. She also annotates that Yihui plans to inter his late primary wife in the valley.¹⁸⁸ This definitely shows that they knew about the plan for the cemetery and were able to take their own death as a matter for joking.

Returning to domestic matters from traveling outside, Yihui and Taiqing record in poetic exchanges with matching rhymes a common diet they maintained during autumn—

¹⁸⁴ The allusion of “burying in the same grave” originates from “Dache” 大車 in the *Shijing*. The author pledges to the person s/he loves saying, “While living, we may have to occupy different apartments, but when dead, we shall share the same grave. If you say that I am not sincere, by the bright sun I swear that I am” 穀則異室，死則同穴。謂予不信，有如皦日。 Later, the term “tongshue” was used to indicate a husband and wife entombed in the same spot and to say that the pair had a good spousal relationship. The translation is from Jame Legge, *The Chinese Classics, Vol 4: The She King or The Book of Poetry* (Hong Kong: Lane Crawford & CO, 1871), p. 16.

¹⁸⁵ The original story is from *Soushen ji* 搜神記. Han Ping 韓憑 and his wife deeply loved each other. However, King Kang of Song coveted Han's wife and thus enslaved Han Ping to build the city wall. Once Han's wife secretly sent a letter with a poetic pun hinting to Han at her willingness to commit suicide. Short after getting the letter, Han killed himself. One day Han's wife took advantage of her touring with the King to jump down from a terrace. In her posthumous letter, she made a plea for her and Han Ping to be buried together. Nevertheless, the King on purposely entombed them opposite each other. Amazingly, overnight both of their tombs grew a tree, and after just ten days, their roots intertwined, and the branches interlaced, as if two people were bending their bodies towards each other while lying prone. “The tightly interlacing branches” became a well-known allusion to a couple with a deep conjugal love. See Gan Bao 千寶 (?–336), *Suoshen ji jiaozhu* 搜神記校注, ed. and annot. Wang Shaoying 汪紹楹 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), pp. 141–42.

¹⁸⁶ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Eryue nian'er ri su Dannan'gu Tiantaisi” 二月廿二日宿大南谷天台寺, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 543.

¹⁸⁷ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Nangu qizhang zhang shiba ju,” in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 552.

¹⁸⁸ Gu Taiqing, “You Nan'gu Tiantaisi ershou” 游南谷天台寺二首, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, pp. 72–73.

—salted vegetables—in Beijing.¹⁸⁹ Taiqing describes the process of putting leeks into an earthen jar and sealing a layer of salt on the top. Afterwards, she needs to cut off roots of celery and wash the dirt off them. Lastly, after adding some water, she puts a stone onto the jar. She does not clearly indicate who is the subject, whereas in Yihui’s poetic title, he directly states that he is watching the person in the family who is salting vegetables. Comparing her activity with Taiqing’s, rather than centering on the steps of pickling, Yihui lists various kinds of vegetables such as red peppers, eggplants, and Chinese cabbages to be sealed into the jar, forming a colorful scene. It is presumably Taiqing, rather than the servants in the mansion, who is the one making the pickle, which belongs to wifely work. Similarly, Yihui in a poem on his experience of eating shoots of willow describes how Taiqing cooks them.¹⁹⁰ He indicates that his reason is curiosity about his wife’s searching for edible herbs. Her clean white hands hold willow branches and throw them into pots as part of a process of removing bitterness and toxicity. Slowly boiling them along with green bean sprouts and red peppers in limpid spring water, was considered effective in treating chronic diseases. Not only was it able to satiate an appetite, but also tasted like tea and high-quality bamboo shoots. From this depiction, although Taiqing appeared merely through her beautiful hands, her carefulness, cleverness, and talent at cooking as well as her virtue are presented. Meanwhile, Yihui’s work touches another perspective on the gentry that is rarely found in the other three

¹⁸⁹ Gu Taiqing, “Yancai” 腌菜, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 18; Aixinjueluo Yihui, To the tune: “Yufu: kan jiaren yancai sanshou” 漁父: 看家人腌菜三首, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 647.

Pan Rongbi 潘榮陛 (fl. 1723–36) in his *Dijing suishi jisheng* 帝京歲時紀勝 indicates that the timing of pickling is after *Shunagjiang* 霜降 (Frost Descends). Except for eggplant, celery, radish, and so forth, Chinese cabbage with the nickname of “yellow sprout vegetable” was considered the best in the Beijing area. It is as delicious as the winter bamboo shoots from Fuyang 富陽. See Pan Rongbi, *Dijing suishi jisheng* (Beijing: Beijing guji chubanshe, 1981), p. 33.

¹⁹⁰ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Shi liuya” 食柳芽, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 575.

husbands' poetic works.

The poetic exchanges between husbands and wives can be said to present generally several dimensions of the daily life of gentry women. Aside from their literary activities, which were their major entertainments, they also enjoyed taking short trips and watching dramatic performances. In light of this, activities that literary couples would engage in together were exceptions to the strictest regulations of the society, whereby wives were not allowed to step outside their chambers. Those activities together with their spouses were not merely amusements but also actions to cultivate and tighten their affectionate bonds. However, gentry women were almost never at complete ease but would be busy handling the entire household ranging from needlework to financial management, which was the fundamental responsibility of the mistress of a household. Supposedly, the evening was the most likely time to spend in leisure with their husbands as well as in devotion to interests. At the same time, at nighttime it was easiest to create an intimate and sensual atmosphere. Based on this, it is clear that talented wives were not only companions of their husbands in literary activities but also objects of desire. Additionally, with the "excuse" of taking care of the spouse's health, women were granted a legitimate reason to return the husband's gaze or project their own onto him; yet, to comply with the gender norms and poetic conventions, they would present their viewpoints as de-sensualized.

Both women authors and their husbands endeavored to represent images of female virtue in their poetic exchanges. They often expressed ideas of womanly virtue through perfect fulfillment of the expectations of an ideal wife, such as providing meticulous care and demonstrating the ability to wonderfully balance between their literary interests and

the obligations women were expected to shoulder. Male authors would particularly applaud the morality and ability of enduring poverty. In the depictions of male literati, their talented wives would often perfectly match the stereotype of worthy women. However, cultured women were not always compliant as the conventional images suggested; with an agency derived from their literary ability, they would voice discontent at their impoverishment. Besides complaint, their discussions not only covered their future plans but also would include even issues of life and death. Furthermore, in the exchanges, although the proportions were extremely uneven, not only would gentry wives provide mental support to their husbands, but their husbands sometimes would do the same thing, just as in the modern imagination of a companionate couple.

In addition, religious activities served as not only an alternative life choice but also as common practices in daily life. More significantly, albeit that there were certain religious practices that were exclusive to women, according to their revelations, many were jointly engaged in by husbands and wives. Based on this, in the process of cultivation, company or guidance provided by spouses would strengthen the conjugal relationship, which interestingly could be contradictory to the religious doctrines.

Concubinage

Despite the intimacy discussed in this chapter, it would be inaccurate to regard the connubial relationship of these companionate couples in terms of Western ideas of monogamy. Obviously, in the first six years of their marriage before his primary wife, Miaohua, passed away, Yihui and Taiqing were in a polygamous relationship. When Miaohua got sick at the main mansion in the capital, Yihui and Taiqing had been living in the villa since Yihui was appointed as the guardian official of the east imperial graves.

One day a rainstorm aroused Yihui's sentiments towards Miaohua. He mentions that there were many letters from home piling up on his desk; the constant contact illustrated his yearning and loneliness in Miaohua's mind. Under the lamp, he wrote down a newly-composed poetic line on a replying letter, saying, "I miss my wife falling sick in the hometown" 抱病鄉園憶細君; the poet self-annotates that Miaohua at that time was in Beijing.¹⁹¹ In addition, in the verse placed before a series of poems mourning Miaohua, Yihui indicates that after receiving a letter from home, his grief and worry increased. Presumably, it was about the serious situation of Miaohua's illness. In Taiqing's matching-rhymed poem to the verse on the rainstorm, in the echoing lines, she does not directly refer to the primary wife. On the contrary, she expresses her solitude at night. She clearly heard the sounds of rainfall on water plants and concludes with a joyful memory: "Hearing this thing [i.e., the rain] makes me recall the past gathering in the West Garden¹⁹²" 憶向西園聽此君.¹⁹³ The connection among rain, reminiscence, and gathering with friends could allude to the celebrated verse of Li Shangyin, "Yeyu jibei" 夜雨寄北 ("Written During the Rain One Night and Sent Back North"),¹⁹⁴ about hoping for meeting in the future and chatting about the rain that night.¹⁹⁵ According to Feng Hao's 馮浩 (1719–1801) annotation, Li's poem in Hong Mai's 洪邁 (1123–1202)

¹⁹¹ Aixinjueluo Yihui, "Caotang baoyu" 草堂暴雨, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 486.

¹⁹² The West Garden could refer to the imperial garden of the West Han dynasty or to a garden built by Cao Cao 曹操, which was often the locale for holding the banquets of contemporary eminences. In addition, in the Song dynasty, the West Garden belonged to an emperor's son-in-law, Wang Shen 王詵, who often gathered literati at his mansion. Once Wang invited Su Shi, the leading figure in the literary arena, and fifteen other contemporary literati to visit the garden; there are two paintings portraying the phenomenal gathering. Later, there were many imitations. On account of their similar background, Gu Taiqing was more likely to make an analogy to Wang Shen's example.

¹⁹³ Gu Taiqing, "Ci fuzi caotang baoyu yun" 次夫子草堂暴雨韻, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 26.

¹⁹⁴ The translation is from Stephen Owen. See Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*, p. 515.

¹⁹⁵ Li Shangyin, "Yeyu jibei," in *Yuxisheng shiji jianzhu*, p. 354.

anthology, *Wanshou Tangren jueju xuan* 萬首唐人絕句 (*Ten Thousand Quatrains By Tang Poets*), has a different title, “Yeyu ji’nei” 夜雨寄內 (“Written During the Rain One Night and Sent to My Wife”). Feng also comments that the language of this verse is plain and simple, but his affection is deep; thus, it is indeed a poem sent to his wife. However, Gu transforms it from conjugal love to friendship. Evoked by the rainstorm, Taiqing recalls the past gatherings with literary friends, suggested through an allusion to the famous assembly of Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) and contemporary renowned literati at the West Garden. Meanwhile, the previous merry banquet makes the present quiet rainy night more forlorn. Miaohua is probably a member of the gathering, and yet unlike her husband, Gu Taiqing does not directly mention the primary wife. With the company of her husband, solitude still entirely surrounds Taiqing; as a concubine, she is in no position to express her negative emotions like jealousy or complaint. Grace Fong analyzes the terms referring to concubine, such as *ceshi* 側室 (side room) and *pianfang* 偏房 (room to the side), as opposed to *zhengshi* 正室 (central room), meaning the principal wife, visualizes the hierarchical positions between wife and concubine through the “conceptualization of space in the Chinese house.”¹⁹⁶ Fong also argues that their marginal situation granted concubine poetesses more freedom than primary wives to voice their emotions, especially to their husband.¹⁹⁷ In the instance of Gu Taiqing, she reveals that although her original natal family background is on a par with Miaohua’s, she is on good terms with Miaohua, whom she admires, recognizing that having married into the household as a concubine, she is automatically inferior to the principal wife.

¹⁹⁶ See Grace Fong, *Herself An Author*, pp. 58–9.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

Unfortunately, the collected works of the Yihui's primary wife, Miaohua, are not extant, and there is no way to know her thoughts about Gu Taiqing or about Yihui's absence on the verge of her death. Taiqing left no poem about her reaction to the principal wife's death, either. However, on some special dates and incidents, such as the anniversaries of Miaohua's death and her getting new daughter-in-law, Taiqing would do her duty as a concubine calling on the descendants to worship Miaohua, and she accordingly composed verses recalling Miaohua's virtues and the pleasant gatherings that included her. The descriptions of her happy memories with Miaohua reflect both protocol and the likely reality.

Among the four couples, Chen Zhilin and Xu Can are a perfect example of a relationship involving multiple persons; Chen had at least two concubines alongside Xu Can as primary wife. Facing the situation of having to share her husband with other women, Xu Can displays her wifely virtue of generosity to the concubines. She wrote a verse for a singing girl named Huaru 華如 who used to be in her household.¹⁹⁸ In the first half of the poem, she applauds the glamour of Huaru, no matter whether she is frowning or smiling. In the latter half, Xu Can describes her shock at Huaru's thinness due to illness after their hasty farewell. At the separation, the author feels that her heartbreak is aggravated by winds and rain outside. The winds and rain indicate both a real and metaphorical hardship that can be expected in the life of a concubine. Based on this, Xu Can, as the primary wife, fully expresses her compassion for the other wife of her husband.

Chen Zhilin also playfully composes a lyric to thank Xu Can for selecting a pretty

¹⁹⁸ Xu Can, "Zeng shiji Huaru" 贈侍姬華如, in *Zhuozhengyuan shiji*, p. 555.

concubine for him.¹⁹⁹ In the opening line, he uses the common symbol of a twined flower and vine to represent the marital relationship. However, Chen at the same time implicitly reveals his dissatisfaction with the ties; he describes how during the time of their “intertwining,” they would idly let the time pass while seeing their handsome young faces getting old in vain. In the successive line, he jumps to a scene in the inner chamber, saying, “In the mirror with the decoration of a pair of magpies, a woman is trying makeup in a new style” 雙鸞鏡裡試新妝.²⁰⁰ The magpie pattern symbolizes auspiciousness and the ribbon knot held in their beaks signifies being kindred hearts forever. The new style of makeup reflected in the mirror refers to the new member of the household. The portrayal indicates the newlywed status of the concubine and also suggests the introduction of a new member into the existing pair represented by the magpies. In the next line, Chen uses the metaphor of embracing a red flower with a wafting scent to clearly indicate the allurements of the newcomer. He continually states that Xu laboriously picked an outstandingly brilliant lady after exhaustively looking at all of the beauties in the Wu 吳 area. Moreover, in his depiction, in the three years since the concubine had entered the household, his wife has been doting on her as if she were her own daughter. In the depiction from her spouse, Xu Can perfectly abides by the ideal wifely virtue of not only unconditionally accepting the presence of concubines without any jealous reaction but also actively searching for a nice match for her husband. Synthesizing all of the factors, the poet concludes by wondering how he as an old man could not fall in love with the concubine. Here Chen refers himself as “laonu” 老奴 (an

¹⁹⁹ Chen Zhilin, To the tune: “Yumeiren: Xizeng Xiangping” 虞美人：戲贈湘蘋, in *Fuyun ji*, p. 249.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

old geezer), alluding to an anecdote quoted in *Shishuo xinyu* describing how when Huan Wen's wife, who was notorious for her jealousy, held up a knife to the concubine threatening to kill her, the wife, in recognition of her beauty and compliance, dropped the knife to embrace her. The wife then commented that even when seeing the girl, she felt tenderness toward her, to say nothing of what the old man must feel.²⁰¹ Through this anecdote, Chen Zhilin both emphasizes Xu Can's generosity towards his other partners and justifies the changes in the target of his affection, on the other.

However, Xu was not completely acquiescent toward the polygamous situation. As Kang-i Sun Chang points out, Xu Can ingenuously mixes together her life experience of being somehow treated coldly by her husband with the dynastic transition.²⁰² Xu's yearning for the fallen Ming house and her disagreement over Chen's betrayal, which are a hotly disputed issue between the couple, have been discussed in the previous chapter. In addition to the patriotic contents, her sadness derived from abandonment by her husband should also be taken into consideration. She directly tells her husband, "Half a spring of fragrant warmth/Has been cast away. The wasting of my heart needs not that you state it first. Miserable it is, like a pang, and a whimper. Like a whimper: Old love, new favor, are but dawn clouds and flowing moon" 半春香煖，竟成拋撇。銷魂不待君先說，淒淒似痛還如咽。還如咽，舊恩新寵，曉風流月。²⁰³ She was dumped in the middle of the marriage just like the interrupted spring warmth. Furthermore, the author uses several emotional terms, like wasting spirit, miserable, pain, and sessions of weeping, that

²⁰¹ See Liu Yiqing, *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, pp. 576–77.

²⁰² Kang-i Sun Chang, "Liu Shih and Hsü Ts'an," pp. 179–85.

²⁰³ Xu Can, To the tune: "Yi Qin'e: chungan ci Su'an yun," in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*, p. 581; the translation is modified from Charles Kwong. See Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, eds., *Women Writers of Traditional China*, p. 340.

strongly highlight her agony owing to the fact that Chen has a new lover. She also frankly recognizes that Chen knows her suffering, suggesting further blame for him. In her many other poetic works, Xu does not indicate the addressee, although they still convey vividly forlorn and sorrowful feelings.

Among the four male writers in the present study, Chen Zhilin was not the only one to reveal affection to people other than his companionate primary wife. Sun Yuanxiang also in his *waiji*, which by and large consists of his erotic-style poems, mentions some courtesans as well as an anonymous beauty in an affectionate tone. Sun frequently presents his poetic works to a courtesan named Luoxian 羅仙 and expresses their mutual sorrow derived from his yearning. In a verse titled “Playfully Presenting this Poem as a Gift to Luoxian” 戲贈羅仙, he states, “In front of other people, we never shun them from suspicion of having affairs; your body is like a drifting petal falling into my bosom” 人前絕不避嫌猜, 身似飛花墮我懷.²⁰⁴ The description of blossoms in embrace is quite similar to that in Chen Zhilin’s poem about the arrival of his concubine. Sun continues depicting the intimate interaction between Luoxian and himself: “Why, last night after the lamp was darkened, did you stretch the shoe with a decoration of a phoenix’s head over the bamboo mat between us?” 底事昨宵燈暗後, 隔筵伸過鳳頭鞵.²⁰⁵ The scene that he portrays reveals a tension of resistance, but in fact it is full of tantalizing sensual feeling; The darkness and the touch of the foot, which has a strong sexual connotation, have the obvious implications of sexual intimacy. In the case of Chen and Sun, the cover of a joking and playful composition enabled these male poets to write

²⁰⁴ Sun Yuanxiang, “Xizeng Luoxian,” in *Tainzhen’ge waiji*, p. 609.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

about more intimate topics that were less likely to appear under other titles. Sun Yuanxiang in other poems for Luoxian candidly expresses his hope of reunion as well as his willingness to wait for her. Meanwhile, Luoxian's expectations are the same; she gives him a skein of hair, which had long been a love token in Chinese tradition. Sun then astutely associates this hair with their sorrowful longing, asking how only one skein of the hair could be enough to completely thread together the teardrops. The descriptions may not be accurate, but they do disclose a dimension of the life of a companionate couple. For male literati, they could both enjoy the companionship in the literary activities of the inner chamber with their primary wives and share their need for romantic love with courtesans outside their household, on the other. This also attests to the worry and jealousy Xi Peilan would honestly express in her work; she was unwilling to learn of the fact that her husband would get close to other women. Similarly to Xi Peilan, Xu Can in another *ci* acknowledges her apprehension about her husband visiting courtesans when she and he are separated. Xu thus states her hope: "There are willow trees at Zhangtai; you should not tie your horse 章臺有柳君休繫."²⁰⁶ "Zhangtai" refers to the location of a cluster of brothels, while the term "zhangtailiu" 章臺柳 (willows planted at Zhangtai) alludes to beautiful women.²⁰⁷ Based on this, Xu Can not only hopes that Chen Zhilin will keep away from the brothel district, but also expects him to not lose his heart to some other beauty. However, Xu Can is not as optimistic as Xi Peilan. She ends with two

²⁰⁶ Xu Can, To the tune: "Dielianhua: chungui" 蝶戀花: 春閨, in *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*, p. 585.

²⁰⁷ Xu Yaozuo's 許堯佐 "Liushi zhuan" 柳氏傳 records that when Han Xiong returned to his hometown after succeeding in the civil service exam, the singing girl surnamed Liu who lived in the Zhangtai district of Chang'an was kidnapped in the Anshi rebellion. Han wrote a letter asking Liu if the willow growing at the Zhangtai is still as green as before, to see if her mind was unchanged. Afterwards, the term "zhangtailiu" becomes a general phrase indicating beautiful women. See Xu Yaozuo "Liushi zhuan," in Li Fang, comp., and ed., *Taiping guangji*, pp. 3995–97.

contrary scenes: one focuses on an inner chamber full of fragrant smoke diffused from *shuichen* 水沉 incense, using an expression that literally means sinking into water.

Given this, the name of the scent and smoke permeating through the closed room create a downcast and lonely atmosphere, which represents her inner state. The other turns to an outdoor scenery of twelve lavishly decorated towers signifying brothels standing in the spring winds, which have sensational connotations. This suggests her assumption that her husband will against her wishes still enjoy visits to the pleasure quarter.

The examples above clearly reveal the differences between companionate marriages in late imperial China and modern notions of marriage—polygamy then was common. By following the tradition of *guiyuan*, which belongs to “women’s voices,” gentry wives, including the principal wife and concubines, had their own reasons to express their negative emotions about the multi-person relationships. Compared with the delight about these relationships of male literati, the inequality is apparent.

Conclusion

Due to the nature of the marital relationship and poetic regulations, the intimacy presented in spousal poetic dialogues is different from that in either traditional erotic verses or poems on yearning, which were often a monologue expressing the viewpoint or imagination of a male author. Rather, the closeness that these literary couples manifested included not only physical allurements and care but also mental compassion and communications. Obviously, in their husbands’ eyes, gentry wives were not completely desexualized subjects, but their beauty was also subject to the male gaze. However, considering that the addressees and protagonists in the poems are the wives and not imaginary figures, the descriptions of female bodies use allusions and playful tones to

hint at an unspoken intimacy while at the same time complying with poetic and gender rules. This created an interesting tension between the gender regulations and the poem's actual content. Additionally, although adopting descriptive techniques from precedents to use in projecting their gaze onto their spouses, unlike beauties in erotic poetry, their talented wives, to a certain degree, still possessed their own personalities and wills, not merely serving as a desired object. Sometimes women writers would even utilize the perspective of poetry in the erotic style to portray their bodies or establish an intimate atmosphere and afterwards turn to their own voices or self-fashioning.

Apart from the physical level, mental closeness is represented as accompanying each other no matter healthy or sickness, success or failure, at present or in the future. Their communications in addition provided comfort in depression, offered suggestions, and showed appreciation for spouses. In this perspective, companionate couples in their poetic exchanges were present as perfect companions in various activities including literary creation, traveling, and religious practices. More importantly, literary activities enabled educated couples to express their inner feelings to their partners and hence to disclose their desire for intimacy; these activities also created proper chances for them to get physically close to each other.

With some power granted them from their poetic writing, women writers seemingly owned a certain degree of agency that could enable them to modify somewhat an unequal situation and interact with their husbands as if they enjoyed the equality of same-sex friends; however, this was a "virtual equality" that existed only in literary works. In relationships structured as involving a dominance expressed partly through the unidirectionality of a (masculine) gaze that sensualizes its objects, the ability of educated

wives to use a mastery of literary language to acquire some effective autonomy and return or reverse the direction of influence were certainly limited. The husbands were less solicitous of their wives, the wives more bound by household economy and gendered norms and ideas of virtue, and while they were generally concerned to affirm their identity as artists, their literary practices tended to be regarded as entertainments, less important than household duties and dependent on husbands and sons. The interactions and sentiments presented in their literary works could present their lives as more equal than they were, and when as often, they were involved in semi- or fully polygamous relations, they were never equal.

Chapter 4: Painting

Introduction

Poetic inscriptions in painting evolved from descriptive verses closely linked to the images to lyrical expressions that accompanied a pictorial content and became representations of the inner state of either the figure in the portrait or the painters.¹ The Song Dynasty was the crucial period in the development of the sub-genre, since at that time, the literati class was redefining its culture in various ways, including painting. During this period, a large number of literati took up painting in their leisure time. And from this period on, Chinese paintings can be roughly categorized into two schools: paintings produced by professional artists at court, and amateur paintings by literati-officials. The category of amateur literati painting comprises painting per se, inscribed poetry, and the calligraphy of inscriptions, which includes the basic brush techniques of painting. In combining these three forms, painting became one of the vehicles of self-expression and outlets for emotions.² With the rise of literati-amateur painting and following the advocacy of Su Shi 蘇軾 (1036–1101) and Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105), poetic inscriptions in paintings gained greater popularity than before. On the one hand, literati realized that when depending on inscriptions, paintings would have a greater chance to be circulated and transmitted to later generations; and so they were

¹ About the history of inscriptions in paintings, see Aoki Masaru 青木正兒 (1887–1964), Wei Zhongyou 魏仲佑, trans., “Tihua wenxue jiqi fazhan” 題畫文學及其發展; *Zhongguo wenhua yuekan* 中國文化月刊 9 (Jul. 1970): 76–92; Zheng Wenhui 鄭文惠, *Shiqing huayi: Mingdai tihuashi de shihua duiying neihan* 詩情畫意: 明代題畫詩的詩畫對應內涵 (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 1995), pp.17–34; Yi Ruofen 衣若芬, “Tihua wenxue yanjiu gaishu” 題畫文學研究概述, in *Guankan, xushu, shenmei: Tang Song tihua wenxue lunji* 觀看, 敘述, 審美: 唐宋題畫文學論集 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiusuo, 2004), pp. 31–38.

² Marsha Weidner, “Women in the History of Chinese Painting,” pp. 13–14.

more willing to inscribe poems in their paintings.³ Furthermore, Su Shi, as a leader in the contemporary literary arena, proposed the idea that poetry and painting share an identical principle that facilitated the current practice of composing poetic inscriptions in paintings. Based on this idea, the connection between poetry and painting became even tighter, as the two fields were incorporated into a single whole understood as a lyrical means of expression.⁴ During this time, self-inscription was still relatively rare. In this perspective, the action of inscription was not only a form of social communication, but an activity displaying a deep mutual understanding and dialogue between poets and painters.⁵

After the Song Dynasty, poetic inscriptions continually grew in popularity. More and more literati were able to inscribe poems into their own pictorial works. Meanwhile, the social function of poetic inscription was greatly strengthened. In many of their collected works, the considerable amount of inscribed poetry in paintings suggested the frequent circulation of artworks among the literati class. Not only might the number of inscriptions in a painting reach tens of poems but also literati would invite friends as well as celebrities to place poetic works in their paintings.⁶ Additionally, the practice of sending paintings with poetic inscriptions allowed artworks given as gifts to serve as a means of communication between friends, thereby strengthening the bonds of friendship. As Zheng Wenhui has pointed out, poetic inscription in the Ming Dynasty possesses more secular

³ Aoki Masaru, "Tihua wenxue jiqi fazhan," p. 85; Zheng Wenhui, *Shiqing huayi*, pp. 29–30.

⁴ Zheng Wenhui, *Shiqing huayi*, pp. 43–46.

⁵ Aoki Masaru, "Tihua wenxue jiqi fazhan," p. 88–90; Zheng Weihui, *Shiqing huayi*, pp. 31–32.

⁶ Zheng Wenhui, *Shiqing huayi*, pp. 28–35, 210; Huang Yiguan 黃儀冠, "Wanming zhi Shengqing nüxing tihuashi yanjiu: yi yuedu shequn ji ziwo shengxian weizhu" 晚明至盛清女性題畫詩研究: 以閱讀社群及自我呈現為主 (master's thesis, Zhengzhi University, 1998), p. 97; Mao Wenfang 毛文芳, *Juanzhong xiaoli yi bainian: Ming Qing nüxing huaxiang wenben tanlun* 卷中小立亦百年: 明清女性畫像文本探論 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 2013), pp. 47–49.

characteristics, stemming from its frequent role in social interactions, and inscriptions in paintings of fruits and plants frequently emphasized the earthly meaning of praying for longevity and prosperity.⁷ Another difference, noted by Aoki Masaru, is that instead of landscape painting, portraiture became the principle genre.⁸ Portraits with inscriptions could therefore serve as vehicles for expressing ambitions as well as emotions and as a means of self-fashioning in dialogues in painting.⁹

The participation of women authors in this sub-genre basically followed its development. In the Southern dynasties, few poems about objects in paintings are attributed to women. In the tradition of *yongwu* poetry, through association with objects, talented women voice sentiments that are often derived from female experience, such as abandonment by a lover. The motif of abandonment also highlights the function of poetic inscriptions as social communication. A Tang period anecdote records that a talented woman, Xue Yuan 薛媛, sent a self-portrait with a poetic inscription to her husband, who was going to marry another lady and was unwilling to return to her. After reading her work, he felt regret and changed his mind.¹⁰ During the late imperial period, especially the late Ming and Qing Dynasties, numerous cultured women participated in literary activities. Aside from talent in writing, many women also demonstrated artistic genius in painting. Due to the admiration for domestic life in the contemporary culture, gentry women gained access to various arts, including literature, plays, and paintings, within their households. Consequently, both men and women literati learned painting skills not

⁷ Zhen Wenhui, *Shiqing huayi*, pp. 149, 337–45.

⁸ Aoki Masaru, “Tihua wenxue jiqi fazhan,” p. 91.

⁹ Zheng Wenhui, *Shiqing huayi*, pp. 292–94; Mao Wenfang, *Juanzhong xiaoli yi bainian*, p. 319; Huang Yiguan, “Wanming zhi Shengqing nüxing tihuashi yanjiu,” p. 29.

¹⁰ See Xue Yuan, “Xiezhen jifu” 寫真寄夫, in Peng Dingqiu, ed., *Quan Tangshi*, p. 8991.

only by imitating copies of previous works from manuals, but also by receiving instruction, mostly from relatives.¹¹ With talents in either or both of the two artistic fields, many women poets actively engaged in the composition and circulation of poetic inscriptions in paintings.

Aside from its extra-familial social function, as Xue Yuan's story shows, paintings and inscriptions cultivated the idea of companionate marriage. Many cultured husband-and-wife couples inscribed poetic works in paintings by their spouses, and numerous poetic titles reveal that gentry wives would inscribe poetry on drawings on behalf of their husbands. Some couples would even collaborate in painting a single picture.¹² Qi Gong 啟功 (1912–2005) describes an interesting incident about Yihui and Gu Taiqing's collaboration on inscriptions in pictorial works by a renowned painter, Yun Nantian 惲南田 (1633–90). The poems by Yihui are in dark ink, while Taiqing's are written in a light-colored ink. On scrutiny, according to Qi, the inscriptions were actually all from Yihui; he would change his writing style and ink color to inscribe verses on behalf of his wife. The reason for this “ghostwriting” was probably either that at the time Taiqing was not conversant with calligraphy or that she was hesitant about writing directly onto a masterpiece.¹³

Among the four pairs of couples, the two in the Qing period were more active in inscribing poetry in paintings. Shen Yixiu has five poetic inscriptions in her collected works, but Ye Shaoyuan was involved in none of them. Although Xu Can enjoyed fame

¹¹ Marsha Weidner, “Women in the History of Chinese Painting,” pp. 13–14; Ellen Johnston Liang, “Women Painters in Traditional China,” pp. 84–87.

¹² Ellen Johnston Liang, “Women Painters in Traditional China,” p. 88.

¹³ Qi Gong, “Gu Taiqing ji xu” 顧太清集序, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 3.

as a celebrated painter of the time,¹⁴ her husband left no trace of his authorship in her artistic works. One reason for the increase of inscriptions by talented women was the fad of inviting poetic inscriptions as a means of social interactions as well as the flourishing of women's public communities in the Qing era. For Xu Can, a large portion of her pictorial works were painted after Chen had passed away. The major theme of her portrayals is a Bodhisattva; this serves as a means of overcoming depression and sorrow, especially after returning from Manchuria.¹⁵

Yihui and Taiqing were extremely prolific in writing poetic inscriptions for paintings; they not only inscribed poetry in portraits of each other, but also had scores of poems inscribed in their collection of paintings. Besides writing poetry in works about or by their spouse, a series of inscriptions in a painting about Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan showcases how their close friends became involved in and commented on their conjugal

¹⁴ In *Yongxianzhai biji* 庸閑齋筆記 records that Xu painted five thousand Bodhisattvas to pray for the longevity of her mother. Some of them were appreciated by the Shunzhi 順治 emperor and thus entered the imperial collection. *Siliu zhi tan* 四六枝譚 indicates that some believers would worship a Bodhisattva portrayal by Xu Can. According to *Shichao xinyu waibian* 十朝新語外編, in order to beg for the favor of the emperor, allowing her to bring Chen's body back to his home town, she offered thousands of Bodhisattva paintings as tributes. The sovereign consented to her request. From this perspective, the popularity and value of her artwork is clear. See Chen Qiyuan 陳其元 (1812–81), *Yongxianzhai biji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), p. 2; Shen Weicai 沈維材, *Siliu zhi tan*, quoted in the appendix of *Zhuozhengyuan shiyu*; See Xu Can, *Zhuozhengyuan shici ji* 拙政園詩餘, in *Qingdai guixiu ji congkan* 清代閩秀集叢刊, ed. Xiao Ya'nán 肖亞男 (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2014), vol. 2, p. 557.

¹⁵ Li Zhenyu 李振裕 (fl. 1670), in his congratulatory prose for Xu Can's 84th birthday, mentions that since returning from Manchuria, Xu stopped composing poetry and was painting over five thousand portraits of Bodhisattvas. Deng Zhicheng 鄧之誠 (1887–1960) also records that Xu Can devoted the rest of her life to serving her mother-in-law and painting Bodhisattvas. See Li Zhenyu, *Baishi shanfang ji* 白石山房集, in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書 (Tainan: Zhuangyan wenhua, 1997), vol. 243, p. 733; Deng Zhicheng, *Qingshi jishi chubian*, p. 777. For discussions of Xu and other women artists relieving their depression by means of painting Bodhisattvas, see He Xiaoying 何曉英, "Xu Can *Dahixiang zhi sisuo*" 徐燦大士像之思索, in *Xiangying shenguan: Ming Qing renwu xiaoxianghua xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 像應神全: 明清人物肖像畫學術研討會論文集, ed. Aomen yishu bowuguan 澳門藝術博物館 (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2015), p. 188; Tao Yongbai 陶詠白 and Li Shi 李湜, *Shiluo de lishi: Zhongguo nüxing huihuashi* 失落的歷史: 中國女性繪畫史 (Changsha: Hu'nan meishu chubanshe, 2000), p. 37.

relationship. These poetic dialogues also represent expressions of conjugal affection as well as gender regulation and tension.

Painting and Inscription as a Form of Communication

For any educated couple, portraiture could be a way of expressing the subject's personality as well as describing the mental world and served as a means of manifesting mutual understanding and affection between husbands and wives. In 1834, Yihui and Taiqing both turned 36 years old and celebrated the tenth anniversary of their marriage. That year, they also had a Daoist monk paint a portrait in Daoist attire of each of them, and each inscribed lyrics on their own and their spouse's portrayal. In the inscribed poem in her portrait,¹⁶ Taiqing describes herself in Daoist attire with two hair buns, thereby evoking the image of the Daoist female deity, Magu, who was noted for her longevity. Nevertheless, considering her ordeals before getting married, and her long process of religious cultivation, she sighed, saying, "Do not say that the immortal can retain the face [of youth]; Magu's hair at the temples has already turned hoary" 莫道神仙顏可駐, 麻姑兩鬢已成霜.¹⁷ The divergence suggests her lament and anxiety over the passage of time, as well as underscoring a feeling of alienation or even confusion about whether she herself is the portrait's subject. At the end, the poetess comforts herself with the typical Daoist idea that she lives in the mundane world only temporarily and watches this world as if it were merely a game of Chinese chess.

In his inscription,¹⁸ Yihui provides more details about the painting. For example,

¹⁶ Gu Taiqing, "Ziti dao Zhuang xiang" 自題道裝像, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Aixinjueluo Yihui, To the tune: "Jiangchengzi: ti Huang Yungu daoshi hua Taiqing dao Zhuang xiang" 江

Gu Taiqing wore a robe and hat in the archaic style of the Quanzhen 全真 School and with golden earrings on her ears. In the rest of the *ci*, on the one hand, he cheers her up with the joy of traveling, whether in the material or the immortal world. On the other hand, he mentions the secular pleasure of gathering with children and enjoying fortune as well as fame as a kind of comfort. However, with similar Daoist thoughts, Yihui concludes that the delight is only ephemeral and that one should clear hindrances rooted in the mind, and even forget about the worries of life and death. Clearly, both the setting of the portrait and the content of the inscribed verses present the couple's shared interests and beliefs.

In the inscribed *ci* on his portrait,¹⁹ Yihui displayed utter contentment and high-spiritedness. He depicts himself in a Daoist robe and crown and holds a jade tablet while standing between two immortal children. Satisfied with his current status as a rich nobleman, he feels not at all trapped but carefree. He even imagines himself riding a flying dragon above the clouds and wandering by the Ganges River to witness grains of sand considered equivalent in number to all of the dust in the world. In viewing the painting, the poet again indulges his imagination of himself as an immortal roamer in the celestial realm and expresses his faith in the idea of reducing all of one's attachments to the human world. On the contrary, Taiqing describes the portrait in a calm tone with a pentasyllabic regulated verse. Slightly unlike the lively depiction of Yihui himself, she portrays the subject in a solemn way; citing the worshipping Laozi in his immortal residence, a jade tablet, Daoist amulets, an imperial carriage, and banners belonging to

城子：題黃雲谷道士畫太清道裝像，in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 659.

¹⁹ Aixinjueluo Yihui, To the tune: “Xiaomeihua: ziti Huang Yungu wei xie huangguan xiaozhao” 小梅花：自題黃雲谷為寫黃冠小照，in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 658.

deities, she represents her husband as a sober person who has successfully attained the essence of the Way. As such, Taiqing extols her spouse and states, “There should be paths that lead to the three immortal mountains; As the bird flying on touched wings with you, I am willing to return there together” 三山應有路，附翼願同歸，²⁰ showing that she seeks to accompany him to this destination. At the same time, she reveals their closeness and profound affection.

The poetic exchanges inscribed in the paintings also record the life of the literary couple, especially with the use of repeated inscriptions in a single artwork. In the title of the set of poems inscribed on another painting, Taiqing narrates a history. In the bingxu 丙戌 year (1826), when returning from a trip, Yihui brought back a hand scroll of a landscape painting showing a man reading books and hearing the sound of a waterfall behind a thatched cottage. Nine years later, they together inscribed poems on the painting, and Yihui even wrote that because the name of the painter and date were absent, he would take it as a portrait of himself.²¹ Two years after the first inscriptions, having randomly checked their books, they again used the words that they had previously rhymed to compose a pair of verses. Taiqing mentioned that they “unrolled the painting and talked about things that had happened during their ten years together” 披圖共話十年事，²² thereby underscoring that painting and inscription could serve not only as a means of communication, but also as an activity through which a husband and wife could

²⁰ Gu Taiqing, “Ti Huang Yungu daoshi hua fuzi huangguan xiaozhao” 題黃雲谷道士畫夫子黃冠小照, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 386.

²¹ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Ziti tingshu guanpu tu” 自題聽書觀瀑圖, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 561.

²² Gu Taiqing, “Bingshu fuzi you Fangshan de shanshui xiaozhou. Jiawu tongti. Bingshen xia, oujian tushu, you huci qianyun, gecheng ershou” 丙戌夫子游房山得山水小軸. 甲午同題. 丙申夏, 偶檢圖書, 又五次前韻, 各成二首, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 162.

strengthen their emotional bonds. Inevitably, Yihui again regarded the artwork as his own portraiture, “recollected his laborious life and bygone dreams from the beginning” 勞生舊夢憶從頭。²³ He found it startling that eleven years had passed rapidly; in his remembrance, those years were full of disturbances, including the death of his primary wife and his dismissal from the court. Facing the melancholy that her husband expressed, Taiqing comforted him with the reminder that in Daoist philosophy one may either live in seclusion from the world or join the earthly world, and that as long as one can relax his heart, any situation in the world is fitting. Through this particular form, mental comfort was not only achievable, but also became a medium for delivering on promises. Yihui conveys his expectation in the end: “This day we unroll the painting and follow the rhymes of each other; In the future when opening up the handscroll, we should revisit this place” 此日披圖互次韻，他時展卷當重遊。²⁴

The inscribed poetry furthermore indicates that the use of inscriptions in painting was not an occasional activity, but, for these two, a common practice in their daily life. In an inscription on her own painting of an apricot tree (Illustration 1), Taiqing recorded a lovely interaction between herself and Yihui, saying, “Under the bright window, I ask you to inscribe poetry on it. For the moment, to keep in mind the time of our tour in the past” 明窗下倩君題，聊記取，舊遊時。²⁵ Yihui in his reply writes out a short conversation between them: “The painter herself felt delighted and said to me that today

²³ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Ci Taiqing Jiawu ti wumingshi *Guanshu tingpu tu yun*” 次太清甲午題無名氏觀書聽瀑圖韻, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 600.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Gu Taiqing, To the tune: “Yan gui liang: ziti hoaxing” 燕歸梁：自題畫杏, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 585.

indeed did not pass in vain” 畫師自喜向我云，今日真為不空度。²⁶ In a quatrain inscribed on a pictorial work by Taiqing, Yihui expresses an understanding of his wife’s perhaps superior talent: “You are suitable for painting, and I am suitable for composing poetry” 卿宜為畫我宜詩。²⁷ As such, through the juxtapositions of painting and poetry as with the zither and *ce*, 瑟 (zither-like instrument) which typically symbolize a harmonious marriage, Yihui not only expresses his appreciation but, more importantly, transforms the metaphorical terms into an actual division of the artistic creation in terms of a companionate relationship. In this, both the harmonious character of their interaction and the seeming equality of their relationship are clear. The painting with the inscription is a vehicle of memories past; at the same time, the depiction of the situation of creation unveils a scene of conjugal intimacy amid artistic activity.

Painting with inscribed poetry provided an opportunity for cultured couples to demonstrate their closeness. In pictorial works, the couple could present their shared religious beliefs, mutual emotional support, and affection. Together with inscribed poetry, painting also plays the role of preserving moments of significance in their life. In the process of communication that they exhibit, a dimension of the daily life of the cultured couple surfaces, in which artistic activities such as poetic exchange and painting are crucial to creating an intimate atmosphere and strengthening the marital bonds.

A famous portrait of Taiqing titled “Small Portrait of Hearing Snow”²⁸ (Illustration

²⁶ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Hua xing ge ti Taiqing suozuo jufu” 畫杏歌題太清所作巨幅, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 629.

²⁷ Aixinjueluo Yihui, “Ti Taiqing hua er jueju” 題太清畫二絕句, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 566.

²⁸ The painter of this portrait of Taiqing is unknown. Zhang Zhang indicates that Taiqing’s descendent, Heng Jipeng 恆紀鵬 (1899–1966) photographed it. According to Qi Gong’s 啟功 (1912–2005) preface to Taiqing’s collected works, the original was lost during the Cultural Revolution. A painter, Pan Jiezi 潘潔茲 (1915–2002), copied a new one based on the photo and Qi Gong inscribed the date as April 1978. See

2), showing her leaning on a bamboo fence looking at a snowy scenery outside, was produced by an anonymous painter when she was 39 years old. The painting shows, from the direction of the viewer, through the moon door and the plum tree beside it, a corner of her inner chamber with piles of books on the table. Her inscription fully supplements the painting with the context of creation. While reading alone, she hears the sound of snow hitting the bamboo branches. As midnight approaches, she feels a coldness penetrating her thin green sleeves. Afterwards, Taiqing walks over to stand by the window, seeing the night scene outdoors—a gloomy sky above the empty valley and a vastness of the landscape covered with snow and plum blossoms. The poetess furthermore intended to add the mood of composition evoked in her mind and the floral aroma that wafted in the air into the painting on silk. More importantly, she clearly indicates that the profound purpose of this piece is to “preserve my genuine appearance for the human world” 為人間留取真面目.²⁹ As Mao Wenfang 毛文芳 has argued, it is not only a typical portrait of a talented gentry woman but the statement of a gentry woman’s strong desire to transmit her fame to later generations.³⁰

Yihui, as an appreciative viewer, casts his gaze onto the portrait. After describing the same scenery of dim snow mountains and an empty valley behind a set of clouds, he imaginatively suggests that Taiqing’s light make-up is fading and about to fall off. Stating that “that person with green sleeves is alone. She leans on the fence listening” 翠袖伊人

Zhang Zhang, “Gu Taiqing Yihui nianpu jianbian” 顧太清奕繪年譜簡編, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 741.

²⁹ Gu Taiqing, To the tune: “Jin lü qu: ziti ‘Tingxue xiaozhao’” 金縷曲: 自題聽雪小照, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 559.

³⁰ Mao Wenfang, *Juanzhong xiaoli yi bainian*, p. 328.

獨，倚欄正傾聽，³¹ he echoes not only his wife's description but also Du Fu's famous poetic lines: "The weather is cold and the green sleeves are thin; The beauty leans on the slender bamboos in the dusk" 天寒翠袖薄，日暮倚修竹。³² The similarity attests to one way in which a man might imagine the life of a lonely woman. However, shifting from the subject, the author turns to offering a plan for them to both go into seclusion, inspired by the landscape they have envisioned. He hopes that they can "return amid the mountains, and face each other drinking under the cliff as it turns green in spring" 歸去來山中，對酌春巖綠。³³ Compared to Taiqing's emphasizing her "standing in seclusion and solitude" 立幽獨，³⁴ Yihui concludes with an acknowledgement of their companionship in the enjoyment of leisure.

Similarly, in another poetic inscription by Taiqing to the same painting, this one titled *The Painting of the Two Purities, Plum Blossom, and Bamboo* 梅竹雙清圖，Taiqing and Yihui interestingly portray divergent and even opposite atmospheres. Through utilizing and paralleling various descriptions—a "faint fragrance" 幽香，"dappled shadows swaying," 疏影徬徨，"able to endure frostiness and glamor" 冷豔，and "through the curtain and the window frames, the light is dim; above the fence, the moon at dusk" 簾櫳燈暗澹，籬落月昏黃——³⁵the *ci* in which Taiqing conveys impressions of loneliness, iciness, and gloominess. Additionally, the poetess describes

³¹ Aixinjueluo Yihui, "Ti Taiqing *tingxue xiaozhao*" 題太清聽雪小照, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 617.

³² Du Fu, "Jiaren," in *Dushi xiangzhu*, p. 552–54.

³³ Aixinjueluo Yihui, "Ti Taiqing *tingxue xiaozhao*," p. 617.

³⁴ Gu Taiqing, To the tune: "Jin lü qu: ziti '*Tingxue xiaozhao*,'" p. 559.

³⁵ Gu Taiqing, To the tune: "Yi nanwang: ziti '*Meizhu shuangqing tu*'" 意難忘：自題梅竹雙清圖, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, pp. 576–77.

herself holding a cup of wine as she walks back and forth under the eaves, pondering poetic sentences. The scenery then stimulates her memories and fantasy of the two plants as beautiful objects in an otherwise empty valley. Yet, she is unable to dissipate her feeling of longing by stretching her imagination; though immersed in it, the swaying shadows are also a reflection of her inner state of unease. The *ci* ends with her sorrow and anxiety about wasted time. Furthermore, when she says, “Besides exuberant slender bamboos, dappled shadows sway,” personifying the plants, the bamboo and plum blossoms appear to have become the embodiments of her inner world. This is not an isolated instance in Taiqing’s works; the symbolization is not just of herself but also of other female relatives and friends. For instance, in the inscribed poem, in the painting of a plum blossom and camellias, as a present to her stepdaughter, Mengwen 孟文, she states that “the graceful dappled shadow is your incarnation” 疏影婷婷是化身.³⁶ The same idea is demonstrated in the inscribed *ci* in the self-portrait of Taiqing’s bosom friend, Shen Shanbao 沈善寶 (1808–62), which is set in the plum forest.³⁷ Additionally, in the *ci* inscribed in the drawing of a plum blossom, Taiqing emphasizes its lofty dignity and ability to endure cold. Given the characteristics of self-expression that amateur painting by literati possesses, this may be considered a representation of the painter.

In contrast, Yihui demonstrates a peaceful state of mind, which enables his bright and serene depictions. He shows a leisurely appreciation for the newly-blooming plum flowers as well as the fence-like pattern formed by the reflected shadow on the window

³⁶ Gu Taiqing, To the tune: “Zhegu tian: wei Mengwen xie dogghua xiaofu bingti” 鷓鴣天: 為孟文寫冬花小幅並題, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 414.

³⁷ Gu Taiqing, To the tune: “Kanhuaui: ti Xiangpei mei Meilin miju xiaozhao” 看花回: 題湘佩妹梅林覓句小照, in *Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 693.

paper. The poet here adopts the typical sentence pattern of *gexing* 歌行 (songs) to guide his beloved to enjoy the beauty outside. He writes, “Do you not see, in front of the curtain, that the moon is just bright and charming? It sheds light on the double purities and reveals their lofty ambitions and superb charm; under it, the color of the leaves is light and that of the flowers is vivid” 君不見，小簾前，正月色娟娟。照雙清高懷朗韻，葉澹花鮮。³⁸ Evidently, he is foregrounding the brilliance of this image to cheer her up. In the latter part of the inscribed *ci*, Yihui is playing with the doubleness in the idea of the plant as the incarnation of Taiqing. He regards the plum blossom, whose scent is similar to that of orchids, as being like one who truly understands him, having a similar heart; at the same time, the “*tongxin*” could also refer to his spouse. Successively, he uses the Buddhist allusion of picking up a flower and smiling, which indicates enlightenment and the tacit understanding³⁹ between two persons, to reinforce the idea that they have kindred hearts. The poet continually makes allusions to these two plants and the beauties in the references. For the bamboo, he appropriates the imagery of Du Fu’s poem, stating, “The green sleeves the beauty wears are thin” 佳人翠袖薄。⁴⁰ For the plum tree, he states, “The stone-like bed the immortal sleeps on is cold” 仙子石床寒, referring to an anecdote about Zhao Shixiong 趙師雄. Zhao encountered a lady on the mountain of Luofu 羅浮, which is famous for plum blossoms, and they drank together delightfully; after waking, he found himself sleeping under a plum tree and realized that the lady was

³⁸ Aixinjueluo Yihui, To the tune: “Yi’nanwang: ti Taiqing *Meizhu shuangqing tu*” 意難忘：題太清梅竹雙清圖, in *Gu Taiqing Yihui shici heji*, p. 694.

³⁹ See “Nianhua weixiao” 拈花微笑 entry in *Foxue da cidian* 佛學大辭典, ed. Ding Fubao 丁福保 (1874–1952) (Taipei: Huazang jingzong xuehui, 2012), vol. 2, p. 1372.

⁴⁰ Du Fu, “Jiaren,” in *Dushi xiangzhu*, pp. 552–54.

the deity cultivated by the tree spirit.⁴¹ Yihui then creates an ambiguity between the double purities and his wife, who by her own account is wandering outside. Following the allusion to the immortality of the plum, the poet depicts how in a dream he had after drinking, the plum blossom beauty seems to lament the passage of the rosy era is echoed in Taiqing's inscription. Meanwhile, in terms of the distance he creates through the uncertainty occasioned by the word "si" 似, Yihui represents his gaze at the painting and his wife. Furthermore, the author concludes this piece with an expression of yearning linked to a romantic feeling aroused by the painting, which "is hard to transmit within the portrait" 畫裡難傳; based on the doubleness, the addressee of the yearning is both the subjects as well as the painter they represent.

Similar to their role for Gu Taiqing and Yihui, plum blossoms as an embodiment of the painter also appears in the poetic inscriptions Xi Peilan wrote for Sun Yuanxiang's works. Here, it is the husband, rather than the gentry wife, who regards the plum tree as the epitome of his spirit. He frequently visited various scenic sites that were famous for beautiful plum trees or plum forests, which also provided the recurring themes in his poems and paintings. Sun mentions more than once in his own poetic inscriptions his sense of a tight connection between the plant and himself. The link or affinity is partly affective and seems to him exceptional and unique. He states in an inscription in his painting of a plum tree, "In my eyes, with regard to things, there is no one appropriate; Only the plum blossom is akin to me in spirit" 眼中於物無一可，惟有梅花神似我。⁴² Not only the paintings by him, but other works of his on this theme serve as a platform

⁴¹ See Liu Zongyuan, *Longcheng lu*, in *Tang Wudai biji xiaoshuo daguan*, p. 141.

⁴² Sun Yuanxiang, "Ziti huamei" 自題畫梅, in *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p. 264.

for showing this association. One verse in its title records that one of his friends obtained a long handscroll of an ink-painted plum blossom by a celebrated plum painter, Wang Mian 王冕 (d. 1359). The friend had requested that Sun write an inscription on it. By describing Wang's craze for plum trees, Sun is also projecting himself onto the image of Wang. He directly pinpoints that they are "borrowing the figure of a plum blossom to portray the essence of oneself" 借梅花形自寫真.⁴³ Furthermore, while Sun imagines Wang's process of drawing as based on his own experience, Sun suddenly pauses with a question that he asks while impersonating Wang's voice, as to whether later generations will understand the meaning of the plant and the intention of the creator. Simultaneously, by vividly portraying the picture's process, composition, and atmosphere, Sun indicates that he considers himself the sole person who truly understands the essence of the plant, painting, and the painter.

As the companionate spouse, in a quatrain inscribed in a painting of a plum blossom by Sun Yuanxiang, Xi Peilan displays a complete understanding of the connection her husband feels to the plum blossom. Also, the poetess evidently expresses her appreciation for the painter. The poem reads:

冰雪聰明玉作胎，宛然花放近瑤臺
 Its cleverness is as ice and snow, and jade makes the origin;
 Vividly flowers bloom close to the jasper terrace⁴⁴.
 枝旁添箇如盤月，直并前身畫出來。⁴⁵
 Beside the branch, a moon is added round like a plate;
 Directly he drew out the moon with his previous life.

⁴³ Sun Yuanxiang, "Wu Zhuqiao zhang de Zhushi shannong momei changjuan gou meihua yijuan lou zhuti juanhou" 吳竹橋丈得煮石山農墨梅長卷，構梅花一卷樓，屬題卷後，in *Tianzhen'ge ji*, p. 141.

⁴⁴ The term refers to terrace made of jasper. Also, it can denote the realm in which immortals reside or a tower covered by snow.

⁴⁵ Xi Peilan, "Ti Zixiao huamei" 題子瀟畫梅，in *Changzhen'ge ji*, p. 649.

Peilan arranges the descriptions of the process of painting along with the composition of the picture in the second and third lines. The location of the plum tree establishes the backdrop of the painting as representing the celestial realm. It also shows the plant's qualities of loftiness and purity. Furthermore, since Xi overtly states that the plum tree is the reincarnation of her husband, those qualities thus also apply to him in her imagination.

Preceding the poem discussed above in Xi's collected works, she records an interesting anecdote about the couple's use of painting and inscription. The incident involved a mutual friend of theirs. She details in the title that Qu Bingyun—also a talented poet—painted several spring orchids and Sun added a plum branch. Xi then playfully inscribed the verse on the side. The short narrative manifests on the one hand Sun's penchant for plum blossoms and showcases painting exchanges within the circle of gentry women, on the other. More importantly, painting plays the role of prompting their close interaction, while the depiction reveals their equal roles in artistic creation. In the poem, Xi Peilan imagines her friend drawing the piece by replicating the orchid on her hair in front of the dressing mirror, and Xi suggests that the orchid perfectly symbolizes Qu Bingyun. The author turns the latter half of the poem back onto her husband and herself. Interestingly, she addresses her spouse as “the poet” 詩人 rather than as the painter; this choice reflects Xi's emphasis on this identity. She not only pokes fun at Sun's “forcibly adding plum buds” 彊為加梅萼⁴⁶ to the painting, but also questions whether he “knows if the two types of floral branches are matched or not” 知道花枝肯

⁴⁶ Xi Peilan, “Wanxian hua chunlan shuduo Zixiao tain mei yizhi yu pang xiti” 宛仙畫春蘭數朵，子瀟添梅一枝于旁戲題, in *Changzhen'ge ji*, p. 649.

合無。⁴⁷ Although there is no clear evidence showing whether Qu saw the painting that Sun modified, and so no way to know her response, the teasing mixed with a slight scolding somehow contains Xi's intention of offering an explanation on his behalf. Yet, at the same time, she expresses her pride at the talent of her husband, while teasingly mentioning his obsession with the plum tree.

The engagement of friends in the expression of conjugal affection between Sun and Xi is fully demonstrated in a series of artistic creations and re-creations comprising Sun Yuanxiang's poem, a painting based on it by Sun's friend, Qian Du 錢杜 (1764–1845), and inscriptions from Ji Lanyun 季蘭韻 (1793–ca. 1848), a female friend of Sun's, and Sun himself. At first, Sun wrote a poem titled “My Wife Considered Building a Small House on a Lake and Enjoined Me to Compose a Poem on this Thought” 內子思結一廬於湖上，屬余賦其意, a poem depicting their ideal life of reclusion and his admiration for his wife. The poem reads:

耦耕心事畫眉年，小隱須尋屋似船
 Matters of the heart come up while plowing side-by-side during the years of
 penciling eyebrows;
 For a lower-level reclusion,⁴⁸ we should look for a house that is like a boat.
 四面不容無月到，一生常得對山眠
 The four sides of the house must always have moonlight to come in;
 During our entire life we are often able to sleep facing the mountains.
 只消春酒如湖水，盡種梅花作墓田
 Only need spring wine that is like lake water;
 And plant plum blossoms all around to serve as burial ground.
 未敢便乘蓮葉去，怕人猜著是飛仙
 We do not yet dare to just ride a lotus leaf and leave;

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ The term denotes becoming a hermit in the mountains. According to a poem by Wang Kangju 王康琚, reclusion is classified as having two levels, with the higher-level of reclusion being living in seclusion in the court and city. The criterion is whether the person needs to depend on their external environment to ease their earthly worries. See Wang Kangju, “Fan zhaoyin shi” 反招隱詩, in Xiao Tong, ed., Li Shan, annot., *Wenxuan*, pp. 1030–31.

Afraid that other people will correctly guess that we are flying immortals.⁴⁹

From the vivid descriptions, by listing gorgeous scenes—moonlight, mountains, wine, plum blossoms, and a lake—for their dream reclusion, it is no wonder that this verse could inspire a pictorial rendering. Within the halcyon atmosphere, the poet not only again expresses his great fondness for plum blossoms, but also envisages the afterlife. Following the idea of arranging the tomb, the concluding couplet turns to the depiction with its religious connotations that implies that he and his wife, and she in particular, would likely be mistaken for a deity. Meanwhile, Sun is playing on the ambiguity between his refusal of being mistaken by using the expression “not yet dare,” whereas the “worry” was being discovered their real identity. More significantly, the poet directly starts the verse with two phrases that have strong connotations of a harmonious marital relationship, namely “plowing side-by-side” and “penciling eyebrows,” thus setting an affectionate tone. In this way, it echoes the title in suggesting that they enjoy a conjugal closeness and profound mutual understanding. On top of that, the feeling of intimacy is reinforced through words with romantic meanings and associations, such as the words of spring and lotus. Based on several love-tokens, the poem reaches a climax in the ending line. By using the term “flying immortal,” Sun Yuanxiang fully conveys his adoration for his wife, and especially her beautiful appearance.

Unfortunately, Qian Du’s painting inspired by Sun’s poem is not extant. The content of the painting therefore can only be a matter of speculation based on Sun’s poem expressing gratitude to the painter. Easily imagined, the first section of the poem is

⁴⁹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Neizi si jie yichan yu hushang zhu yu fu qi yi” 內子思結一塵於湖上，屬余賦其意, in *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p. 10.

dedicated as a eulogy to Qian. The poet praises his work with the typical compliment to the effect that his painting captures a poetic essence; Sun also lauds the painter for blending various painting styles of preceding painters with which he is conversant. The poet then describes successively the features of his pictorial rendering: soaring mountains, lotus blossoms soaking in the green lake, and the bright moonlight shedding light onto the plum forest and the water, which obviously are visualized from the original poem. When talking about the figure, Sun states, “Which immortal lives in reclusion here? People says that it is old Xiao Shi who once lived on the Qin terrace.⁵⁰ Can he be the incarnation of a plum blossom?” 是何神仙隱於此? 人道秦臺舊簫史. 得非梅花化身是?⁵¹ Echoing Xi’s poetic line inscribed on his painting, Sun highlights his tight connection with plum blossoms as an incarnation. Likewise, although still referring to the person as an immortal, he again intentionally creates an ambiguous distance through raising questions and using opinions from other people rather than asserting a definite denotation. In addition, Sun applies an allusion to Xiao Shi and Nongyu 弄玉 to resonate with the theme of the first verse and to the idea of becoming immortal, the poet smoothly continues to write of his entry into the heavenly realm as “in the green sky a lotus leaf drifts near; I ride on it to play in the heaven beyond heaven” 碧空浮來一葉蓮, 我乘遊

⁵⁰ According to Liu Xiang’s *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳, Xiao Shi was a person conversant with the playing of a flute to imitate the sound of phoenix. The Duke Mu of Qin married his daughter, Nongyu 弄玉, to Xiao and built a tower for them. Xiao taught Nongyu the instrument and the sound induced phoenixes to gather. One day, Xiao Shi rode on a dragon and Nongyu on a phoenix to become deities together. More details, see Liu Xiang, *Liexian zhuan jiaojian* 列仙傳校箋, annot. Wang Shumin 王叔岷 (1914–2008) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), pp. 80–85.

⁵¹ Sun Yuanxiang, “Yu you ‘zengnei shi’ [text of whole poem omitted in transcription] . . . gai shaozuo ye Shumei cai shiyi wei yu zuo *Yinhu xieyin tu changge fengxie*” 余有贈內詩 . . . 蓋少作也. 叔美采詩意為余作隱湖偕隱圖, 長歌奉謝, in *Tianzhen ’ge ji*, pp. 229–30.

戲天外天。⁵² In a playful tone, he reiterates the idea of being an immortal. However, he does not emphasize the conjugal intimacy in the allusion but steers the focus back to himself, highlighting the single pronoun, “I.” More significantly, after the transition, Xi Peilan, whose existence is vaguely suggested in the allusion of the famous couple, is erased in the later portrayal. The rest of the poem turns to the friendship between Sun and Qian, with Sun hoping that they will become neighbors and collaborate in the same way again; Qian paints a pictorial work based on a poem he is planning to write. Without the painting, it is impossible to know whether Sun chooses to avoid mentioning his wife due to the content of the painting. Perhaps the reason for the evasion lies in the purpose of this verse, which is to express gratitude to the painter. Based on this, both Qian Du, the painter and the relationship between the two men become the focus, rather than the couple. At the same time, facing his same-sex friend as the one “engaged” in their marital closeness, the poet demonstrates a relatively cautious attitude by keeping a certain distance.

The inscriptions by Ji Lanyun⁵³ serve as examples of an opposite tendency. At Sun’s request, Ji inscribes the painting by Qian Du twice. The theme of her inscriptions is her appreciation of their harmonious conjugal life. Ji’s first two poetic inscriptions read:

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Like Sun Yuanxiang, Ji Lanyun was born into a cultured family in Changshu. Ji was betrothed to Qu Songman 屈頌滿 (b. 1792) when she was eight years old, whom she married at the age of 21. They enjoyed a harmonious marriage. According to her poetic oeuvre, they read, composed, and played musical instruments together; when Qu left Changshu to study, they exchanged poems full of yearning. According to Yao Fuzeng 姚福增, in the epilogue to Ji’s collected works, their contemporaries called them Qin Jia and Xu Shu. Qu’s younger sister praised them as a well-matched pair (嘉耦), and they “[j]ust finished holding brushes [to compose poetry] and again [started] tuning the strings [of a zither]” 拈毫才罷又調弦. Qu Songman’s aunt, Qu Bingyun, was Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan’s bosom friend. Sun also wrote literary works discussing Qu Songman’s parents. This makes sense, considering that he was acquainted with Ji through Qu’s family. Unfortunately, their happy marriage was short-lived; it lasted for around a year and a half, owing to Qu’s death from sickness. See Huang Baoxuan 黃寶萱, “Ji Lanyun yu *Chuwuan’ge ji yanjiu*” 季蘭韻與楚畹閣集研究 (Master’s thesis, Donghai University, 2011), pp. 24–32.

子瀟太史屬題隱湖偕隱圖(二首) “Grand Historian Zixiao Asked Me to Inscribe the Painting of *Being Hermits Together by the Recluse Lake*” (two poems)

verse 1

壯歲才名重玉堂，拂衣歸作老鴛鴦

In the the prime of life, your reputation for being talented was valued in the jade hall;

But dusting off clothes, you returned to become a pair of old mandarin ducks.⁵⁴

收來宦海人雙隱，壓倒名卿命婦行

Retreating from the sea of officialdom, you live in seclusion as a pair;

Surpassing the name of renowned officials and ladies with titles.

verse two:

萬頃湖波別有天，春山眉黛自年年

There is a separate world on ten thousand acres of rippled lake;

Eyebrows of kohl like spring hills naturally will be there year after year.

前生慧業今生福，令我披圖一惘然

The karma of wisdom from the previous life becomes good fortune in this one;

This makes me suddenly feel lost while unfolding the painting.⁵⁵

Closely following the theme of the painting, Ji concentrates her descriptions on two subjects—seclusion and the romantic and affectionate feelings between husband and wife. In the first quatrain, the poetess portrays Sun as a person who values the reclusiveness of his domestic life and even his marital relationship above his career. Furthermore, Ji, as a woman, implicitly claims that for Xi and her husband being able to accompany each other is superior to public fame and recognition, which was often regarded as one of the highest accomplishments a wife could attain. More importantly, the author repeatedly emphasizes the situation of their staying together as a pair through the description of this and the structure that arranges their marital life in the central lines of the poem. Furthermore, the focus shifts from Sun himself to the two accompanying

⁵⁴ The term “fuyi” means shaking off the dust from one’s clothes and beginning seclusion.

⁵⁵ Ji Lanyun, “Zixiao taishi zhuti *Yinhu xieyin tu*,” in *Chuwan’ge ji* 楚畹閣集, in *Jiangnan nüxing beiji: sanbian* 江南女性別集: 三編, eds. Hu Xiaoming 胡曉明 and Peng Guozhong 彭國忠 (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2012), vol. 2, p. 1022.

each other, and then turns to the wife at the end when the presence of Xi Peilan is apparent. The large part of the poem devoted to paring also resonates with the term “yadao” (to surpass). Interestingly enough, when mentioning mandarin ducks, which are typical imagery for a loving couple, Ji uses the adjective “old” to not only add a playful note of teasing the happy couple, but also to suggest that the couple spend their life together until old age.

Ji Lanyun in the second poem continually reinforces the bond between Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan. The delineation of the landscape is not merely an objective portrayal of the ideal secluded world where they reside but also a representation of their closeness. On the one hand, the separate realm suggests the identity of the couple as immortals, and the isolation of this space from the outside world indicates an intimate room for them, on the other. Additionally, the association between hills and eyebrows connects the outside world and inner chamber, where the marital harmony represented by the penciling of eyebrows takes place. On top of this, “year after year” suggests stability as well as the eternal. The author shifts to her own reflection at the end; the happiness of the couple stirs sorrow in Ji. She is reminded of loneliness after losing her husband at an early age. The melancholy of the poem also springs from the sharp comparison between the couple’s being fated to be together from good karma and the poetess herself supposedly lacking cultivation in her previous life and this causing her ill fortune in the present. This series displays the “engagement” of the third person in the companionate relationship through poetic comments, while at the same time the couple in the poem serves as the epitome of a loving couple and gives the poetess an opportunity to recall her personal experience.

Approximately two years later, Ji Lanyun composed another *ci* that she placed in the same painting. In the subtitle, she indicates that “Grand Historian Zixiao Again Asked Me to Inscribe in the Painting of *Being Hermits Together by the Recluse Lake*, by Qian Shumei” 子瀟太史復以叔美錢君所畫隱湖偕隱圖屬題。⁵⁶ Based on this, obviously, this painting includes at least a second round of circulation involving inscriptions. The use of the same themes and settings in a different genre involves the suggestion of a certain sensuousness in the details.

尚湖千頃，鏡奩光蕩得，吟情如許。
 Thousand acres of Lake Shang, sparking its light in the mirror;
 Stirring such a mood for composition.
 別有古梅花世界，一笑春無尋處。
 There In addition is a world of ancient plum blossoms;
 Just a smile, there is no place to find spring.
 鷺老吹涼，魚眠選夢，
 Herons get old while winds turn chilly;
 Fishes in sleep selects their dreams.⁵⁷
 一葉飄然去。
 A small boat leaves in drift motion.
 玉台雙影，暗香飛上眉宇。
 Paired shadow on the jade terrace,
 Secret fragrance alight on the eyebrows.
 還記仙署當年，珊珊珮振，
 Still remember that year in the past at the office;
 Jangling jade pendent on her waist was swinging.
 妙奏凌雲賦。
 Marvelously played the rhapsody of soaring clouds.
 拋卻軟紅塵十丈，料理天隨漁具，
 Abandon the ten-*zhang*-high soft red dust,
 Supposed that the heaven of principle⁵⁸ follows equipment for fishing.

⁵⁶ Ji Lanyun, To the tune: “Yuzhongtian: Zixiao taishi fu yi Shumei Qianjun suohua ‘*Yinhu xieyin tu*’ zhuti,” in *Chuwan’ge ji*, p. 1125.

⁵⁷ The original line in the *Zhuangzi* says, “Your dream you are a bird and rise into the Heavens. You dream you are a fish and swim down deep into the lake. We cannot tell now if the speaker is awake or asleep” 汝夢為鳥而厲乎天，夢為魚而沒於淵，不識今之言者，其覺者乎？夢者乎？The translation is from *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Martin Palmer and Elizabeth Breuille (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 56.

⁵⁸ One school of Daoism states that principle exists in myriads things in the world and “litian” refers to the ultimate principle of the universe, and therefore it is the origin of universe and homeland of human souls. For more details, see Mu Yu 慕禹, *Yiguandao gaiyao* 一貫道概要 (Taipei: Tianju shuju, 2002), pp. 19–

寫韻樓台，鷗波亭館，
 Tower for writing rhymes and pavilion surrounded by waves that seagulls
 lived.
 一樣同圓聚。
 The same as gathering like a complete circle.
 菱歌四面，紫簫還按新譜
 Songs of picking water-caltrops around four sides,
 The purple flute returns again play a new score.

The poetess begins with a mixture of indoor and outdoor; The glitter stimulates “the interest in, and mood of composing, poetry,” which can come from either of the observer, Ji Lanyun herself, and the described couple. The smiles between the couple appear to surpass in affective force the most beautiful spring scenes. The woman writer imagines the companionate couple enjoying the sharing their literary interest. At the same time, by using the words “*qing*” and “spring,” she clearly reveals their affectionate intimacy. Their closeness furthermore represents through the exclusiveness of the world via the word “*bie*” 別 (literally means separately); in the world encircled by ancient plum forest, intimacy the couple enjoyed gets strengthened. Meanwhile, the exclusiveness also conveys the idea of reclusion, which is expressed in the following two lines by allusions. Herons has long been regarded as a symbol of life of hermits since they are free of cunning. “Fish in dreaming” in the *Zhuangzi*'s original fable is a metaphor that a person dreams of being a fish and he will do what he is allotted to, but unable to distinguish between dream and reality just as life and death. Yet, Ji picks the word “*xuan*” 選 (select, choose) to emphasize reclusion is out of their free will.

Later, the two figures step onto the stage: Similarly, the depictions of the couple and their eyebrows evidently allude to stories of penciling eyebrows that encode spousal

intimacy. Additionally, the “secret fragrance,” here a metonymy for plum blossom, falling on the forehead suggests a completion of make-up that originates from plum petals falling on princess Shouyang’s 壽陽 forehead and becoming a fashion afterwards.⁵⁹ More importantly, the secret aroma emanating from her skin strongly suggests the closeness of their bodies. Furthermore, the image of plum blossom forms an interesting contrast: it symbolizes their lofty purity as hermits, but also connotes the sensuality of their relationship.

In the second stanza of this *ci*, the author turns to the celestial realm. Ji fantasizes in the past that Xi Peilan had gracefully walked in the office of immortals; the euphonic sounds made by the jade on her waist with each step echoed the song about “soaring clouds” that was then often played in the celestial realm. In addition, following the idea of “soaring clouds,” Ji continues, they abandoned the prosperous human world and asserts that the heaven of principle, denoting the origin of the universe and the homeland of human soul, rests on life of recluse signifying by fishing. Following this, she depicts them as if they were always together, no matter whether writing poetry or enjoying lightheartedness just like the seagulls at the lodge by the water in their reclusive life. In this way, Ji Lanyun seamlessly links the two worlds, that of heaven and that of their life together in reclusion, thus elevating the latter to the level of the heavenly. Moreover, Ji not only reiterates the idea of the couple’s immortality, especially Xi Peilan’s, but expands it to include her previous life, the poetess suggesting that Xi possesses

⁵⁹ According to *Za wuxing shu* 雜五行書, as quoted in *Taiping yulan*, Princess Shouyang of Liu Song in the Southern Dynasty one day was sleeping in one of the palace halls, when a plum blossom was blown down onto her forehead. The flower stuck to her head for three days before finally being cleaned off; afterwards, her forehead bore the imprint of the plum blossom. Other palace maids found it pretty, and would cut plum petals and pasted them on foreheads to imitate it. Later, especially in the Tang Dynasty, this became fashionable as part of one’s make-up. Li Fang, comp. and ed., *Taiping yulan*, p. 256.

immortality by nature. At the end, the author responds to Sun's verse expressing gratitude to Qian Du by alluding to the Xiao Shi story; Through that allusion, the couple receive confirmation of their immortal status, as well as praise for their creativity and close relationship with each other.

In 1826, the same year that Ji Lanyun's *ci* was composed, Sun Yuanxiang also inscribed a verse on the painting. In the opening couplet, "At random we spoke frivolous words in front of the mirror; unexpectedly we ended up drifting on a leaf of lotus on misty waters" 偶然風語鏡台前，竟泛煙波一葉蓮，⁶⁰ he reveals his appreciation of the result of transformation from his own poem into a painting. He humbly suggests that their dialogue involves exaggerated claims, and notwithstanding that Sun is not totally unaware of the circulation of his work, he demonstrates his uneasiness about revealing their spousal interaction to "outsiders." Sun's uneasiness is also demonstrated in his equivocal statements on Qian's re-creation. In Sun's collection, right before this poem expressing gratitude to the painter is a verse recording his delight at his reunion with Qian Du after twenty-five years. He states, "Apart from literary works, there are no real descendants; But the painting holds in it life's vicissitudes" 著作外無真子嗣，圖畫中有小滄桑。⁶¹ It is impossible to verify whether their discussion of poetry and painting include the poem he presents to his wife, which in Sun's own terms is a "juvenile piece," but it is likely that Qian's idea of doing a painting based on Sun's poem resulted from their meeting. However, in the following verse for Qian, he writes that "my poems have never been incorporated into your painting before; this time it is secretly portrayed by

⁶⁰ Sun Yuanxiang, "Ziti *Yinhu xieyin tu*" 自題隱湖偕隱圖, in *Tianzhen 'ge ji*, p. 342.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

your marvelous paintbrush” 我詩從未入君畫，被君妙筆偷寫之。⁶² By using the word “secretly,” Sun indicates his unawareness of the making of this painting, while at the same time, this suggests that his close relationship with his wife is seen by the friend.

Despite his ambivalence, by means of pictorial portrayal and poetic inscription, Sun still emphasizes the two themes, conjugal intimacy and the reclusive life, which are represented through the couple’s pleasantries in their inner chamber and the misty lake with its neighboring hermits. The poet then continues to recount the leisure and pleasures of reclusion as “Clouds cluster around the house the scholar with lofty integrity dreams; opening the door, as long as we open the door, poetic works are copious in the days of white gulls”⁶³ 繞屋雲圍高士夢，開門詩滿白鷗天。⁶⁴ In the later descriptions, their carefree and ingenuous life paves the way for their discovery of a connection with the immortal world. From within the plum forest, the poet states that they can leave behind their mundane worries. In addition, they are delineated as minor deities in the painting catalog, which is famous for its high quality and the delicacy of the collection, published by Jiezi 芥子 garden. Certainly, besides emphasizing their identity as immortals, Sun also wishes simply to laud the outstanding skill of Qian as painter. In the ending couplet— “Supposing both of us covet the official signet, we would betray matters of the heart in the years of penciling eyebrows” 若使雙雙圖黻佩，負他心事畫眉年⁶⁵—the

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ According to *Liezi* 列子, there was a person fond of gulls who went to sea with them every day. Hundreds of gulls would come close to him. One day, his father wanted him to fetch one for playing. The next day, when he went on the sea, all of the gulls hovered overhead, and none flew down to him. In the Chinese literary tradition, gulls then represent a life of reclusion that was indifferent to the earthly world. See Lie Yukou 列禦寇, *Liezi jishi* 列子集釋, ed and annot. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), pp. 67–68.

⁶⁴ Sun Yuanxiang, “Ziti Yinhu xieyin tu” 自題隱湖偕隱圖, in *Tianzhen’ge ji*, p. 342.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

author returns to his own marital relationship, simultaneously alluding to the original piece. He clearly maintains that they have same moral standard, and for its sake are both willing to endure an austere life. Their concern to live a virtuous life is also the basis of their harmonious marriage. Moreover, this shows that their dialogue about their reclusive life is not just frivolous words.

In cases like this, the process of poetic composition, inscription, and pictorial re-creation demonstrate a shift in focus that reflects the influence of prevailing gender norms. Owing to the absence of a surviving version of Qian Du's rendering, it is hard for us to ascertain how the painting was actually composed. However, another painting attributed to Qian that portrays another celebrated literary couple at that time, Chen Wenshu and his wife, Gong Yuchen 龔玉晨 (1770–1838), in an almost identical setting may shed some light on speculation of how the painter might have rendered Sun's poem. This pictorial work (Illustration 3) belongs to the album of paintings adapted from Chen's poems;⁶⁶ this one mentions that Chen and Gong have an arrangement to be hermits together ("xieyin" 偕隱) at the West Creek, where there is a huge plum forest. The top left and bottom right corners are filled with plum trees, while the blank part is flanked by the trees that then form the creek in a diagonal running from top right to bottom left. A boat with a cabin carrying three people and a crane stops at the middle left. The crane and a man who is said to be the fisherman, due to his appearance and the oar he is holding in his hand, are standing on opposite sides of the boat. As typical symbols of reclusion, the crane and the fisherman refer to the couple's hopes. Chen and Gong are sitting closely

⁶⁶ The album is titled "Chen Wenshu shiyi ce" 陳文述詩意冊, whose authorship needs further investigation. I am grateful to Professor Li Yuhang for pointing to this material.

together in the cabin, which shapes a private space that is semi-separated from the outside so as indicate an intimate atmosphere. More importantly, although the couple basically sit opposite each other, the viewers would see Chen's face in profile, while Gong is sitting beside the window, facing the scenery outside. In this way, the focal point of the painting seems to be on the female figure. Although the depiction of Gong is too small to present her body shape in detail, and the painter does not show her facial features, she seems to be bathed in viewer's gaze and captured in a feminine gesture. It is unlikely that Qian would adopt the same manner of composition in rendering Sun's verse. However, we can be sure that when painting the subject of "xieyin," Qian Du would give a certain portion of the painting to the woman figure. Based on this, it may be possible to explain the reaction of Sun Yuanxiang, partly as manifesting gender difference. Interacting with his male friend, he is wary and protective of his marital relationship. He almost erases Xi Peilan, who first comes up with the idea of secluding themselves on a lake and appears in the original piece, based on the description in the poem addressed to Qian, and his invitation for a female friend to comment on their matrimonial life. The attitudinal distinction shows that Sun is prudent about the "contact" between his wife and a man not from the household, even though the contact is entirely on paper. Given that, it illustrates the Confucian gender division along with a certain male anxiety. This is a gender difference that is similarly displayed in works by authors of both genders. The woman poet places more emphasis on the close relationship of the couple, and their reclusion provides the perfect backdrop for highlighting and facilitating their intimacy. In contrast, being a hermit in Sun's works is a life choice, involving the enjoyment of their cardinal virtues and their representation. Here the female figure, Xi Peilan, plays a more

prominent role in the portrayal of the woman writer than Sun Yuanzhang, her husband.

Interestingly, on the one hand, Sun shows his carefulness with his exposure of their closeness in their marital life. At the same time, he does not avert the “gaze” of other men on their intimacy. He still devotes some space to depicting and building their image as a mutually understanding couple in the self-inscription. The contradictions reveal the ambiguity of a companionate relationship that takes place partly through literary and artistic (re)creation. When the relationship is promoted under the rubric of the cult of *qing* and women’s talents, it has a chance to go beyond households through the circulation or publication of literary works. However, at the same time, the divulgence also evokes anxiety about the blurring of inner and outer, and the consequent exposure of the relationship to other males.

Conclusion

Following the tradition of the subgenre, poetic inscriptions within marital relationships still shoulder the functions of self-expression, and of manifesting a mutual understanding as well as dialogues among the person being painted, the painter, and the inscribers. Given that, the artistic and literary activity serve to strengthen their spousal bond and the relationship of *zhiyin* 知音 to each other, providing mental comfort, and recording their experiences of connubial life. Additionally, as Mao Wenfang indicates, the portraiture of beauty was a legitimate way to present bodies of women as like objects in public view, framed for the individual’s gaze.⁶⁷ The coverage also extends to portrayals

⁶⁷ Mao Wenfang, *Wu, xingbie, guankan: Mingmo Qingchu wenhua shuxie xintan* 物, 性別, 觀看: 明末清初文化書寫新探 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 2001), pp. 342–44.

of gentry wives. In the situation of a literary couple, male literati would reveal, not only in actual physical practice but also in inscribed poems, their gaze as projected onto their spouses.

However, interestingly, the circulation of portraiture does not seem to provoke anxieties on the part of male literati about the exposure of women belonging to inner chambers. Neither do male literati reveal uneasiness about male painters painting portraits for their wives. This highlights the uniqueness of the painting of companionate couples. In addition to the examples of *xieyin* painting above, another similar pictorial work belongs to this type, *Biwu lianyin tu* 比屋聯吟圖 (Illustrations 4-5), discussed by Susan Mann, which also illustrates the gender division. So too does *Biwu lianyin tu*, commissioned by Zhang Yaosun 張曜孫 (1807–63), which portrays the three couples of the Zhang family composing poetry in their respective chambers. *Biwu lianyin tu* exists in two versions: one was painted by Tang Jiaming 湯嘉名 (?) and the other was by Wang Yun 王昀 (?). The painter and inscribers, including female relatives of the Zhang family, Gu Taiqing, and Shen Shanbao, of the former painting are all female, whereas the authors of the inscriptions on the latter are all male literati, including Zhang Yaosun's Korean friend.⁶⁸

The attitudes of male literati toward the motif of spousal intimacy in painting demonstrate their ambivalence. On the one hand, the paintings serve as a statement of their extolment of the value of marriage and their enjoyment of a companionate relationship. As the visualization of genteel couple, when portraying this type of painting,

⁶⁸ Yi Ruofen, “Duhua siren: shiwu zhi shijiu shiji Chaoxian Yanxingshi de ji'nian tuxiang” 睹畫思人：十五到十九世紀朝鮮燕行使的紀念圖像, *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 33.2 (Dec. 2015), note 81, p. 67.

painters directly appropriated the composition of paintings of scholars in the company of female entertainers and often delineated gentry couple sitting opposite each other.⁶⁹ According to Lara Blanchard, the motif of scholars mingling with female entertainers was meant in part to “suggest the high-minded and untrammelled quality of the court of city hermit.”⁷⁰ By the same token, within the contemporary trend and state policy of extolling Confucian familial morals in the Qing period,⁷¹ appearing as a married companionate couple would be a way for a husband and wife to emphasize their own virtues. On the other hand, in accordance with Confucian gender ideology, they feel hesitant to publically display the marital life that belongs to their inner chambers. When this theme became popular among some literary coteries during the Qianlong and Jiaqing epochs, it revealed the uneasiness of many male scholars in presenting marital intimacy in pictorial form. The origin of this kind of painting in the portrayal of male literati with courtesans may be the part of the cause of this hesitation. As Susan Mann has indicated, gentry women in the High Qing period would consciously distinguish themselves from talented courtesans.⁷² The caution of male literati may have been rooted in that possible association that their primary wives may be mistaken as courtesans. In addition, rather than resorting to mere imagination, painting, as an object of gazing and appreciation, represents visible images that are more likely to divulge the private life of the subjects and to evoke desire on the part of the viewers. This ambivalence indicates the anxiety over the blurring of inner and outer spheres.

⁶⁹ Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family*, p. 96; Private email communication with Professor Li Yuhang, Dec 28, 2016.

⁷⁰ Lara Blanchard, “A Scholar in the Company of Female Entertainers: Changing Notions of Integrity in Song to Ming Dynasty Painting,” *Nan Nü* 9 (2007): 189.

⁷¹ Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 1–18.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 122–25.

Nonetheless, despite the underlying worry, paintings with inscribed poetry in them create an ideal world, whether in portraiture or *xieyin* paintings. Compared with other poetic exchanges, which more or less touch upon some details of the daily life, the poetry inscribed on paintings is all about the future and fantasy. In other words, painting forms a channel to represent an idealized picture of companionate marriage. The creation as well as the circulation of paintings with inscriptions by literary couples became another way of promoting the idea of companionate marriage.

Conclusion

In discussing poetic exchanges between members of a couple, a key example must be *Xixiang ji*. The most famous poetic dialogue between its protagonists is the following:

相思恨轉添，謾把瑤琴弄。

The vexations of love's longing grow stronger; In vain I played the jasper zither.

樂事又逢春，芳心爾亦動。

From happy affair to encountering spring; Your fragrant heart must also have been moved.

此情不可違，芳譽何須奉？

Such passion cannot be denied;
What need to cling to empty reputation?

莫負月華明，且憐花影重。

Do not betray the brightness of moon's blossom;
But covet the heaviness of flowers' shadows.¹ —Zhang Gong

待月西廂下，迎風戶半開。

Wait for the moon beneath the western wing; Welcoming the breeze, the door is half-opened.

隔牆花影動，疑是玉人來。

When separated by the wall, flowers' shadows move; I guess it is the jade one coming.² —Cui Yingying

This exchange happens with a couple who are not yet married and still trysting; they use poetry and playing the zither to flirt with and seduce each other. The protagonists in *Xixiang ji* showcase the typical pattern in Chinese plays and fictions on the romantic love theme: poetry serves as a means of forging a romantic relationship, and the stories ends with the hero and heroine getting married and living happily ever after. Interestingly, however, after the celebrated plot of mutual seduction and the lovers are betrothed, the content of their poetic communications alters slightly from being completely about love

¹ Wang Shifu 王實甫 (1260–1336), *The Story of the Western Wing*, eds. and trans. Stephen West and Wilt Idema (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). p. 196.

² *Ibid.*, p. 205.

to abide by the norms of gender interactions. Zheng Gong begins to address Yingying as “my worthy wife.” In his letter to Yingying, he says:

上賴祖宗之蔭，下托賢妻之德，舉中甲第。．．．小生身雖遙而心常適矣，恨不得鸚鵡比翼，邛邛並軀。．．．後成一絕，以奉清照：玉京仙府探花郎，寄語蒲東窈窕娘，指日拜恩衣畫錦，定須休作倚門妝

Thanks to the protection of my ancestors and the virtue of you, my worthy wife, I have passed the examinations in the highest category. . . . Even though my body may be far away, my heart is always near. Alas, that we cannot fly like two birds on a single wing or nest together like orioles. . . . Here below I have completed a quatrain for your inspection: He who plucked a flower in the fairy precincts of the jade capital; Sends words to the modest and retiring lady of East of Pu: In a day, I will bow to imperial grace and be clothed in daytime brocade; Do not, for any reason, affect to lean by gate.”³

Cui Yingying then replies to the letter in a submissive tone just like a gentry wife:

正念間，琴童至，得見翰墨，始知中科，使妾喜之如狂。郎之才望，亦不辱相國之家譜也。今因琴童回，無以奉貢，聊布瑤琴一張，玉簪一枝，斑管一枚，裹肚一條，汗衫一領，襪兒一雙，權表妾之真誠。匆匆草字，伏乞情恕不備。謹依來韻，遂繼一絕云：闌干倚遍盼才郎，莫戀宸京黃四娘；病裡得書如中甲，窗前覽鏡試新妝

Precisely when I was pondering this, your lute boy arrived, and I saw the traces of your brush. Only then did I know that you had succeeded in the examinations, and I was so overjoyed that I nearly went mad. Your talents and reputation, sir, certainly bring no disgrace to the family record of the chancellor. Now your lute boy returns, and I have nothing to send as a gift except one jasper zither, one jade hairpin, one mottled bamboo brush, one waist wrap, one undershirt, and one pair of stockings to give momentary expression to my true sincerity. These hastily drafted characters lack all deference, and I humbly beg your indulgent forgiveness for my inadequacies. Utilizing the rhymes of your poem, I have ventured to add a quatrain: I’ve learned the full circle of the balustrade watching for the man of talents; Don’t love the ‘flower maidens’ of the capital! In sickness, I received your letter and knew you were of the first rank, So before the window, gazing in the mirror, I try out my new adornments.”⁴

Except for sending a woman’s underwear and socks, which have a strong sexual

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 256–57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

suggestion, they talk about the painful yearning and sharing the delightful news about passing the civil service exam, just like the four couples discussed in this thesis.

The focal shift mentioned above clearly indicates the differences between those who are single and those who are married. Sensual suggestions, which are the main theme of poetic communications between literate single men and women, largely disappear and are replaced by other topics such as familial economy, the civil service exam, parents-in-law, and literary interests, when the two become husband and wife. Gentry wives are presented as capable and virtuous spouses and talented poetesses. In addition, in their poetic exchanges, they also display the qualities of advisors on the husband's career and exams, traveling companions, and jealous wife.

With real cultured couples, poetry also assumed the task of emotional communication between men and women. As is easily imagined, special events, such as farewells, birthdays, and the results of the civil service exam, were more likely to evoke emotional reactions and subsequent poetic compositions. Given this, poetry serves as a record of a life and of momentary emotions. Placing it into the context of a companionate marriage, poetry is a perfect medium for exploring spousal interactions. Compared with other genres that also contain related contents, like biographical documents, epitaphs, or even fiction, as this dissertation shows, poetry not only provides first person voices but also manifests multiple aspects of people's lives other than virtuous deeds and entirely positive and romanticized descriptions. Recent studies have shown that for women writers establishing their fame required help from male relatives; however, voices from the man's side about his cultured wife have been less studied. To understand the mutuality of companionate relationships and see how the couples supported each other

both financially and mentally, it is essential to read poems from both spouses. In addition, without reading the depictions from the husbands, contradictions between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law could hardly be heard.

However, due to the publicity of poetry and the norms of literary composition, it would be unrealistic to regard those poetic exchanges as a complete reflection of the marriages. For example, the poverty they mention could be a standard backdrop for elevating their morality rather than an accurate appraisal of their economic situation. Also, as some poems by Sun and Xi have shown, while others often conceal or omit this, there were actually servants in the household helping them dealing with laborious chores. Additionally, because of the regulations of poetic composition and the general cultural morals, straightforward discontent was not expressed. But this means that there may have been many more disharmonious voices that remained covered in silence. More importantly, considering the readership, including the spouse as the very first reader and other readers of those poems as well as of the collected works, authors would present a bright side in poems and select verses revealing harmonious marital relationships. Accordingly, we have to admit there was a certain performativity in those poetic exchanges.

As with the verses in *Xixiang ji*, separation and intimacy are conspicuous themes. Separation and intimacy fall on opposite poles of a spectrum, between which fell a good portion of the lives of couples from gentry in late imperial China. Poetry could play a significant role in intensifying either condition, while in communication mediated by poems, the conjugal affection could be strengthened in separation. Emotional complexity and depictions of joyful moments were not apparent in many other sources on marriage.

In the context of companionate marriage, it was common to express sorrow, loneliness, and yearning during separation, not merely as an outpouring of depression, but also as a manifestation of a pain rooted in deep love. Poetic communication was also not a one-way emotional expression but could open conversations with significant others. By the same token, gentry women would voice their complaints to their husbands, which was contradictory to contemporary norms of womanly virtue. The discontent over Chen Zhilin's disloyalty to both his wife and the emperor as expressed by Xu Can and the dissatisfaction about poverty in Shen and Xi's minds are conspicuous examples.

Furthermore, even when a partner was deceased, the subgenre of poetry on mourning still assumed the function of addressing and revealing the inner feelings of the authors to their now only remembered spouses. In a close spousal relationship, as a means to forge a bond, poetry in both content and form prompted marital intimacy. The composition of poetry itself, usually conducted at night, was an important activity for nurturing the feeling of closeness between husband and wife. Spousal closeness in poetry is often conveyed through related allusions in a playful tone, especially when close friends of the couple were engaged in commenting on the harmonious relationship. More significantly, to fill in the blanks left in fictional works, poetry by real literate couples would demonstrate their desires for their spouses. Unlike their poetic precedents, who would describe their wives as de-eroticized helpmates, male literati in the late Ming and the Qing periods portrayed their wives under their male gaze. Women writers would suggest their yearning through allusions in order to follow gender norms.

In their poetic dialogues, work, such as attending the civil service exam, and leisure entertainments like involvement in pictorial creation that is affiliated with domestic

space, form another comparison. Although these two subjects both cause companionate relationships to emerge from the inner chamber to the social circle that the couple belongs to, they showcase two different gender relationships coexisting in the companionate marriage. As women were excluded from the selection system, they could only play a supportive role in their husband's career, while in literary and artistic creations husband and wife were basically equal.

However, when facing revelations of spousal relationships, contemporaries, including male literati themselves did not always have purely positive feelings. The paradoxical attitudes towards the companionate relationship emerge when placing it into the contexts of family and social circle. Male literati had more freedom and could be more open about sharing affectionate moments between them and their wives, while women writers were generally conservative and clearly showed their self-censorship and self-sanctioning within the network of family relationships, especially facing mothers-in-law. While the Confucian gender ideology regarded close spousal relationships with caution, the stance of Ye Shaoyuan's mother suggests that alert for the potential "threat" of a close spousal relationship was not just a theoretical statement but a reality. At the same time, the conversations between companionate couples present the dominance that mothers-in-law exerted on their daughters-in-law.

When those exchanges circulated outside of the inner chambers, they inevitably allowed and invited gazes and comments on the husband and wife relationship. Those coteries were definitely the targeted readers in literary couples' minds, particularly inasmuch as those works are a sort of performance to imagined audiences. More specifically, with the awareness of audiences, especially in poems with matching rhymes

with close friends, the performativity is much stronger than in other verses. Xi Peilan and Gui Maoyi's poetic exchanges on Sun's results in the civil service exam could serve as a nice example. Through observations from friends, the image of a harmonious and affectionate literary couple was highlighted; also, those friends would deem the couple exemplars by means of parallels to precedents, particularly Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng. Furthermore, due to the powerful advocacy of talented women by Yuan Mei, companionate couples were more common and welcomed in his circle. However, literary couples were usually not completely comfortable with divulging their closeness. Women poets were highly aware of gender restrictions in their compositions, while male authors would become relatively defensive, particularly when it came to visual materials. Sun Yuanxiang displays an uneasiness about his wife being painted and inscribed by a male literatus. This forms a sharp contrast with the case of a boy actor, Ziyun, discussed by Sophie Volpp.⁵ Unlike the concubine-like male actor, a primary wife of the gentry class was expected to enjoy only a chaste fame; being an object of the desire of men other than her husband was intolerable.

The different stance towards the display of a close companionate relationship disclosed ideological variations as well as contradictions. Within a larger perspective, in terms of the advocacy of *qing*, the high Qing and the late Ming were less different than earlier research suggested. Since genuine *qing* served as an important element in poetic composition, Ye Shaoyuan and Shen Yixiu, and Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan were more willing to express affection to their spouses. Like Ye, who proposes talents, morals, and

⁵ See Sophie Volpp, "The Literary Consumption of Actors in Seventeenth-Century China," in *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2011), pp. 173–213.

beauty as the three deeds for women to acquire fame, Sun does not restrain himself from describing the beauty of his wife. From Xi Peilan to Gu Taiqing, this demonstrates that the later the weaker the effect of *qing* cult on cultured couples which causes them to talk less directly about their intimacy.

In addition to the temporal element, ethnic factors seem to have affected the formation and adoption of different attitudes about gender. Both active in the long High Qing period, Xi Peilan and Gu Taiqing represent different stances on revealing spousal relationships, but Gu was more conservative than Xi with regard to the extent of revelation of intimacy, as well as in comparison with the other two poetesses. Also, compared with other Han writers, Gu Taiqing and another famous Manchu woman poet, Yun Zhu 惲珠, expressed a relatively conservative stance on the issues of gender ideology.

As a case study on four couples, this thesis suggests areas for future exploration. The example of Sun Yuanxiang and Xi Peilan showcases the frequent occurrence of companionate couples and interactions among them within Yuan Mei's circle. A closer look at other companionate couples regarded as belonging to Yuan's coterie could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary idea of companionate marriage. Compared with the situation of companionate marriage in another famous women-poet circle, centered around Chen Wenshu, the special characteristics of Yuan Mei's circle will be clearer. In contrast to the openness of Han counterparts, the reasons for the relatively conservative attitude of Manchu poetesses are also worthy of further exploration; for example, whether Manchu poetesses' emphasis on morals was in accord with the state policy of establishing governing authority. The new

anthology⁶ by Wilt Idema on Manchu poetesses may be a good start. Furthermore, the transition in attitudes towards marriage in the late Qing period, and the role of poetic exchanges between literary spouses after the introduction of Western influence also merits investigation in the future.

⁶ Wilt Idema, *Two Centuries of Manchu Women Poets: An Anthology* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

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Illustrations



Illustration 1. Gu Taiqing, *Apricot*, Qing dynasty. Ink on silk. Capital Museum, Beijing.



Illustration 2. Pan Jiezi, *Small Portrait of Hearing Snow* (quoted from *Gu Taiqing shiji jiaojian*). Photography by Zhang Zhang.



Illustration 3. Qian Du, *Little Boat in Forest of Blossoms*, Qing dynasty, album leaf, color on silk, 23x34 cm.



Illustration 4. Tang Jiaming, *Linking Verse across Adjoining Rooms*. Qing dynasty, scroll, color on paper, 30x65 cm. Belonged to Li Xuesong's 李雪松 private collection. (*Gu Taiqing ji jiaojian*, p. 758).



Illustration 5. Wang Yun, *Linking Verse across Adjoining Rooms*. Qing dynasty, scroll, color on paper, 32x51 cm. Inscriptions: 32x1380 cm