

6-2021

Writing Gender in Early Modern Chinese Women's Tanci Fiction

Li Guo

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Writing Gender

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Writing Gender
in Early Modern
Chinese Women's Tanci Fiction

Li Guo

PURDUE UNIVERSITY PRESS
WEST LAFAYETTE, INDIANA

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Printed in the United States of America.

Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-61249-641-2 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-61249-644-3 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-61249-660-3 (epub)

ISBN 978-1-61249-661-0 (epdf)

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TO MY FAMILY:

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

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I BEGAN MY RESEARCH on women's written *tanci* works in 2008 with the encouragement of my PhD adviser, Professor Maureen Robertson, a leading scholar in early modern Chinese women's poetry studies. After publishing my first book, *Women's Tanci Fiction in Late Imperial and Early Twentieth-Century China*, with Purdue University Press in 2015, I found substantial amounts of understudied written *tanci* works, which led to this second book project. Over the last decade my study of *tanci* narratives has benefited from pioneering scholars' works, particularly research by Mark Bender, Wilt L. Idema, Ellen Widmer, Maram Epstein, Hu Siao-chen, Wai-yee Li, Dorothy Y. Ko, Susan Mann, Grace S. Fong, Xiaorong Li, Patricia Sieber, and Maria Franca Sibau. Patricia Sieber's rigorous commentary on the 2019 Association for Asian Studies (AAS) panel "Queer Renditions: From Late Imperial to Contemporary Sinophone Literature and Culture" inspired me deeply in the development of the structure of this book, particularly chapters 1 and 2. Tani E. Barlow's powerful commentary on the 2020 AAS panel "Rearticulating Gender and Class in Postsocialist China: Women's Literature as Method" and her important elucidations on the concept of "feminine becoming" in the Chinese and Sinophone contexts helped me immensely in improving the theoretical positionality of this study. I am sincerely grateful for the rich, nuanced, and constructive suggestions provided by the two reviewers of this manuscript. Part of chapter 5 has been published as a peer-reviewed chapter in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Literature* (volume 4, chapter 22, pages 2205–16). While developing this book, I have received important inspirations from recent innovative *tanci* scholarship published in Chinese as books or articles, particularly works by Bao Zhenpei, Sheng Zhimei, Zhou Wei, Zheng Zhenwei, Wei Shuyun, Tong Lijun, Li Lingnian, and Wang Zeqiang.

I received crucial encouragement from Justin C. Race, director of Purdue University Press, who provided important suggestions for preparing this book for publication. I am deeply grateful for Susan Wegener, who kindly shepherded the review and revision process. Katherine M. Purple and Kelley J. Kimm have done meticulous editing and proofing for the manuscript. My gratitude goes to Christopher J. Brannan and Bryan D. Shaffer for their substantial work with the front cover design and marketing of the book. I am deeply thankful for my editor and dear friend Virginia Broz, who has assisted me for over a decade in having my manuscripts copyedited and proofread and who played an indispensable role in the development of this book. In the earlier stages of developing the road map for this book project, I received generous help from my MA thesis adviser, Professor Hong Shen at Zhejiang University, who kindly sponsored my sabbatical research trip to Hangzhou in fall 2017 and who helped me access archival materials related to Ming Qing women's literature and vernacular narratives in local libraries. I am deeply thankful for the library specialists at the Shanghai Municipal Library, who helped me locate two rare and understudied *tanci* texts. I am grateful for the library specialist in the East Asian Reading Room of the Library of Congress, who offered generous help for my research trip to locate one of the *tanci* texts discussed in this book. I am thankful to Beijing Palace Museum for assisting me in acquiring the copyright for the book cover image.

This current book on women's *tanci* fiction could not have been completed without the inspiration, support, and encouragement of mentors, peers, colleagues, friends, and family members. I am thankful for Dean Joseph P. Ward of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Utah State University for providing faculty travel funding for two related presentations at the annual meetings of AAS and the Modern Language Association (MLA) and a CARE research trip grant that led to the discovery of a major *tanci* text discussed in this book. I am also thankful for my department head, Professor Bradford J. Hall, who supported my research endeavor for this book project and provided needed conference travel assistance. My promotion and advisory committee chair, Professor J. P. Spicer-Escalante, has provided indispensable support and advice for my research and professional growth for the last decade; this book project would not have been fully shaped without his encouragement. I want to thank my colleague Crescencio López González, who cheered me on during the course of completing this book. Sarah Gordon, who provided suggestions for my first book, again gave me encouragement for my writing endeavors. My friend Jie Guo gave me numerous theoretical suggestions on this project and provided endless encouragement. I owe sincere gratitude to the staff at Utah State's Merrill-Cazier Library, whose decade-long support and outstanding professionalism give me a true sense of at-homeness and make my research activities possible.

Finally, I thank my family for their selfless love and steadfast support of my research pursuits. I dedicate this book to my family: my grandparents Guo Juncai and Jia Qiulan and my parents, Guo Xianxian and Xu Shengze.

NOTE ON STYLE AND EXCERPTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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