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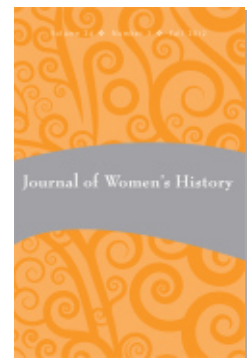
A Disease of Passion: The "Self-Iconizing" Project of an  
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# A DISEASE OF PASSION

## *The “Self-Iconizing” Project of an Eighteenth-Century Chinese Woman Poet, Jin Yi (1769–1794)*

**Binbin Yang**

*Recent studies on women’s history in late imperial China have revealed much about the talented, beautiful, yet ill-fated women as “icons” for complicated sentiments of the male literati. This article calls attention to what has been left out of our knowledge of the creation of these “icons,” namely, the efforts of a woman to negotiate her ways into the cultural memory of her time precisely by writing herself into an “icon.” I argue that, in the case of the woman poet Jin Yi (1769–1794), writing a fatal disease into a myth about romantic passion served as her “self-iconizing” project. Above all, I argue that her conscious appropriation of the prevailing male discourses of her time to the best advantage of her self-creation may open an alternative way of looking at women’s efforts of seeking a voice of their own.*

### **Introduction**

The talented and beautiful women who died young stood for complicated cultural mentalities and became “icons” in late imperial China. Recent scholarship has disclosed the creation of these “icons” as a process in which lofty sentiments of the male literati were projected onto the women, molding them into objects of male connoisseurship and the mouthpiece for the intricate discourse of “sentiment,” or “*qing*” (variously translated as “love,” “passion,” “feelings,” or “romantic sentiments”).<sup>1</sup> While these male discourses and male sentiments gain more nuanced investigations, one may feel curious about the women involved—the women who were at once placed at the “center” of attention, being glorified as cultural ideals, and left at the “margins” in that their voices were buried among a chorus of voices (of men) that strove to tell their stories. What they might have felt or perceived of themselves did not matter. It would seem that there was no “themselves”—subjectivity, indeed—to speak of in the first place.

A quick look at the most outstanding cases among these women may only attest to their objectification—or, even, fabrication—by men. Feng Xiaoqing, the suffering female talent who was said to live in the late sixteenth century, caused waves of admiration among the male literati and was written into a tremendous amount of literature, including short stories, plays, and poetry. Yet her identity was questioned since her story first came

out.<sup>2</sup> He Shuangqing, the talented “peasant woman poet” from the early eighteenth century who suffered from the brutality of her husband and mother-in-law, established her reputation solely through records penned by a man, Shi Zhenlin. She may well have been a creation of Shi and his circle of literati friends, who used her to voice their own senses of frustration and alienation.<sup>3</sup> Ye Xiaoluan, a teenage girl poet from the early seventeenth century who died at the age of seventeen, contrary to Feng Xiaoqing, has a verified identity; she also became an imagined ideal, taking on layers of “guises.”<sup>4</sup> In short, it is impossible for us to identify these women’s “authentic” voices as men often mediated or created them. Scholars also proceed to caution against taking “as given that women [in late imperial China] could define a role for themselves as writers.”<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, no matter how true it is that male sentiments formed a facet of what qualified the rising attention that talented women were drawing in late imperial China, it is now undeniable that a significant number of these women could indeed “define a role for themselves as writers”—as poets, poetry critics, writers of fiction, and authors of their own lives.<sup>6</sup> Different from Feng Xiaoqing and He Shuangqing, many of these women had ascertained existences. They were recorded in multiple historical records. Their lives and networks also emerged from a large number of poems and correspondences that they exchanged with their friends, including men and women. Different, also, from Ye Xiaoluan, many of these women already established their literary fame during their lifetime, and proved themselves to be powerful writing subjects of their own life experiences. Even when we realize that their works relied heavily on male patronage for publication and were, therefore, more or less shaped by the editorial hands of their patrons, it should come as no surprise that their works were also inscribed with their creative energies and acts of agency.<sup>7</sup>

To clarify my point about these women poets as powerful writing subjects of their own lives, it is first of all important to retrace the basic function of poetry in the Chinese literary tradition. The concept of “*shi yan zhi*,” or “poetry as the expression of one’s intent,” bespoke the assumption that poetry served as the authentic, spontaneous, and unmediated self-expression of the poet. In this sense, poetry was often read as the record of the poet’s life experiences, especially when a volume of poetry was collected in chronological order as the poet’s “personal collection,” or “*bieji*.” As the literary scholar Stephen Owen insightfully argues, pre-modern Chinese poets since Tao Qian (365?–427) were conscious poet-autobiographers, and yet it was precisely their obsessive autobiographical impulse that often revealed their works as “voluntary, motivated” constructs—that is, results of painstaking efforts of self-construction rather than immediate reproduction of their experiences.<sup>8</sup>

This autobiographical tendency of classical Chinese poetry inspired women in late imperial China to take up poetry as a means of life-writing. In this respect, the literary scholar Grace S. Fong's recent work on the "self-narratives" in women's poetry of this period is exemplary. Fong's case study of the woman poet Gan Lirou (1743–1819), in particular, reveals a common narrative structure shared by the poetry collections of Gan and other women poets. Through the chronological arrangement of her poetry and division of her poetry collection into chapters that delineate consecutive stages of womanhood (Gan stood out in this latter regard), Gan was able to tell her own life story and to tell it in ways that she desired it to be heard.<sup>9</sup>

It is, however, also necessary to emphasize at the outset that, because male poets established and developed the Chinese poetic tradition, women's use of poetry for their own life-writing is complicated by the problem of "voice," namely, how a woman poet could insert a voice of her own into this male poetic tradition. As the literary scholar Maureen Robertson perceptively puts it, such efforts of seeking a voice cannot fit "neatly into positions such as 'resistance' or 'conformity,'" but rather indicate a process of negotiation that involves "a range of differing and often internally shifting or inconsistent positions" among these women poets.<sup>10</sup> She further puts forth a notion of "re-inscription" to describe how the women poets inserted changes into various subgenres of poetry, such as "*youxian*" ("wandering with immortals"), "*yongshi*" ("writing about historical figures or events"), "*huaigu*" ("meditating on the past"), travel and landscape poetry, and "boudoir" poetry that is laden with the lovesickness of a woman in her boudoir.<sup>11</sup>

Studies of the last of the categories above will be particularly useful for my later discussion. According to the literary scholar Paul Rouzer, the boudoir style had its most important origin in the early sixth-century collection of erotic verses, *Yutai xinyong* (*New Verses from a Jade Terrace*), behind which was a tradition of reading women's laments as political, and of male poets using such laments (eg. adopting the voice of the lovesick woman) to form "homosocial" bonding among themselves.<sup>12</sup> Whereas Rouzer observes few interesting directions in which a woman poet could exploit this male poetic tradition, Robertson finds that women poets in the late imperial period sometimes infused their own interests and concerns into the boudoir, to replace the male erotic interest in the lovesick woman. In poems of this vein, the male voyeuristic gaze into the boudoir becomes "neutralized," and the boudoir itself is "de-eroticized" into women's quarters of female companionship.<sup>13</sup> Robertson reinforces this point in showcasing instances of landscape poetry by women, where the woman being seen at the window (of her boudoir)—an image favored by the male poets—reverses the gaze, looking from inside the window towards the outside expanses of the world.<sup>14</sup>

Late imperial Chinese women poets as writing subjects of their own lives—a complicated issue that is introduced above only in very brief terms—needs further clarification in the case of Jin Yi (1769–1794). A more detailed introduction to Jin Yi will follow soon in my article. I would like to first identify her as one of the “real” women poets whom Robertson and Fong describe, namely, those women poets who were different from the “iconized” cases of Feng Xiaoqing and He Shuangqing. Known as a cherished female disciple of Yuan Mei (1716–1797; a leading male literatus and the most influential promoter of female talents during the eighteenth century), Jin Yi lived among a network of celebrated women poets and illustrious male literati who could testify to both her existence and her reputation as a woman poet.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, Jin Yi also evokes exactly the “iconized” women. She was known to be exceptionally talented and beautiful. Having suffered from a chronic disease, she died very young. These elements of her life appealed so much to her contemporaries that she was glorified as a “banished immortal” after her death, generating a tremendous amount of writings that expanded on the myth of her “innate talent” and her romantic sentiments.<sup>16</sup>

In so far as we witness here a “real” woman poet taking on an “iconized” profile, I would like to propose that Jin Yi serves as an excellent case for us to approach not just the familiar “iconizing” process, but what has been left out of our knowledge of the “iconizing” process, namely, a woman’s perception of herself and her construction of her literary identity in response to the predominant sentiments of her time. The four volumes of poetry that Jin Yi left demonstrate the obsessive self-consciousness of her efforts to give meaning to the torments of her disease. By writing it into a disease of passion, she creates for herself a poetic persona that in many ways resembles the fictional Lin Daiyu, the sickly but beautiful and talented heroine of the great eighteenth-century Chinese novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, who figured as an embodiment of romantic passion, and who replaced Feng Xiaoqing as the cultural ideal of the century.<sup>17</sup> Through such veiled self-celebration, Jin Yi claims for herself a place among those “iconized” women of her time. Her transformation into one of them, I argue, did not set off without her efforts at “self-iconizing.”

I would like to propose, moreover, that Jin Yi’s “self-iconizing” project further problematizes the question of women seeking their own voices. Indeed, when we witness a woman poet engaging so closely with the male erotic poetic tradition of the boudoir in order to cast herself as the glamorous sickly beauty, I wonder whether we have to look for visible traces of change in her lines in order to hear the extraordinary story that she tells about herself.

## Jin Yi (1769–1794): Biographical Information

Jin Yi (courtesy name Xianxian, style name the “Woman Historian Xianxian”) was from Changzhou of Suzhou Prefecture, an area that remained one of the most well-known cultural and literary centers of late imperial China.<sup>18</sup> Born into a local gentry family, she demonstrated remarkable talent at a very young age, and surpassed all her brothers when learning to compose poetry.<sup>19</sup> At the age of twenty, she was married to Chen Ji (courtesy name Zhushi), a young scholar and poet from the neighboring county of Wuxian.<sup>20</sup> She soon turned her new home into a study area. The couple frequently exchanged poetry with each other, and Chen Ji’s writing skills were said to improve rapidly by this means.<sup>21</sup>

The Suzhou area abounded in gentry women poets. Jin Yi developed her connections with these women after she was married and was hailed as their leader, or “*jijiu*.”<sup>22</sup> Later, when Chen Ji became a disciple of Yuan Mei, Jin Yi had the chance to obtain copies of Yuan’s poetry and immediately fell in love with them. After writing to Yuan and “imploring” him to accept her as a disciple, her wish was granted.<sup>23</sup> She was said by Chen Wenshu, another leading male literatus, to eclipse all other female disciples of Yuan.<sup>24</sup> During the spring of the year of 1792, Jin Yi had the chance to attend the famous gathering of Yuan’s female disciples by the West Lake in Hangzhou, and was painted into the scroll that recorded this event.<sup>25</sup>

Being a disciple of Yuan no doubt expanded Jin Yi’s connections. The record of her poetry demonstrates the socializing function of many of her writings, and it was by building her literary network that Jin Yi started to build her literary fame.<sup>26</sup> It was also by this means that Jin Yi’s poor health became a well-known fact among her friends. For instance, when writing in response to the courteous “enquiries” about her disease (or the “*xunbing*” poems), she always communicated an image of herself as a permanent invalid.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, in the cases where these correspondences were included in published anthologies of women’s poetry—for example, those between Jin Yi and the woman poet Wang Qiong, as well as Jin Yi’s preface to the latter’s poetry collection—Jin Yi’s self-representation as an invalid may have reached an even wider audience.<sup>28</sup>

Jin Yi died at the age of twenty-five, having suffered from a chronic disease for several years. There is no indication either in her own writings or in the biographical accounts about what specifically she had suffered from. She was remembered for a volume of poems that were selected by Yuan Mei into his renowned *Suiyuan nüidizi shixuan* (*Selected Poems by Yuan Mei’s Female Disciples*, 1796, hereafter SYNDZSX), and for the complete collection of her poetry, *Shouyinlou shigao* (*Poetry Drafts from the Tower of the Slender Reciter*, four volumes, 1804, hereafter SYLSG).<sup>29</sup> Her works were also

incorporated into major anthologies of women's poetry published during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), including *Guochao guixiu zhengshiji* (*Correct Beginnings for Gentry Women Poets of the Dynasty*, 1831) and *Guochao guige shichao* (*Anthology of Poetry by Gentry Women of the Dynasty*, 1844).<sup>30</sup>

Jin Yi was said by Wu Songliang, a well-known poet, to personally see to it that her manuscripts be collected before her death.<sup>31</sup> From the process in which they later came out in print as her poetry collection, *SYLSG*, we may have a sense of the reputation she had been building. Li Yuankai, a young scholar from Jin Yi's native area, had early on heard much about her poetic talent. While he stayed in Beijing in the year of 1803, Chen Ji happened to come by and common friends introduced the two men to each other. Li Yuankai thus had the chance to read *SYLSG* in its manuscript form. His sister, the poet Li Peijin, immediately became an admirer of Jin Yi after reading the collection.<sup>32</sup> Two of Li Peijin's female friends, Chen Xuelan and Yang Ruiyuan, also fell in love with it, and joined Li Peijin in proofreading it and in obtaining sufficient funds (most probably from their families) to put it in print in Beijing in the year of 1804.<sup>33</sup> To the collection they also attached: a preface by Wang Wenzhi (1730–1802); a preface by Yang Fangcan (1753–1815); a biography by Chen Wenshu (1771–1843); an epitaph by Yuan Mei; and an epilogue by Li Yuankai.

Jin Yi was also said to solicit an epitaph from Yuan Mei on her deathbed, hoping that his words would make her (reputation) "immortal."<sup>34</sup> In granting this wish, Yuan Mei associated Jin Yi's early death with what he proclaimed as the ill fate shared by all women like her: "Whenever I encounter a woman with talent, I find her to be ill-fated. Those who have beauty and talent are still more ill-fated, and those who have talent, beauty, and a good match are the most ill-fated of all. In Xianxian were combined these three harbingers of misfortune. . . . This is indeed the unalterable principle of the creator."<sup>35</sup>

Yuan's mythic decree was, of course, nothing new. The correlation often made between talent and ill fate can be traced at least to the Tang Dynasty (618–906). Implicit in it was the paradoxical conviction, on the one hand, that the ill fate or early death of a poet indicated his exceptional talent (which was inherent in the often-used trope of the "banished immortal"), and, on the other hand, that poetry writing could be a dangerous act and that exceptional poetic talent could entail Heaven's punishment or "jealousy."<sup>36</sup> With changes sweeping across the intellectual, literary, and cultural world of the late imperial period, these convictions took on gendered meanings. Above all, the currents of "sentiment" or "*qing*" foregrounded the "feminine" as a central concern in intellectual and literary developments, and appropriated the presumed "feminine attributes"—such as "beauty, artistic talent, purity of intent, emotional empathy, and passion, as well as physical frailty"—to

express exalted intellectual and literary ideals.<sup>37</sup> The result, as I presented at the beginning of this article, was the rise of the cultural “icons,” women who were valorized for their talent and, yet, who were also mourned over for the frailty of their lives.

Yuan Mei's mythic interpretation of Jin Yi's early death indicates exactly such ambivalent attitudes. And he was not alone. The writings in memory of Jin Yi almost unanimously center on the fatality of her talent, mourning over her ill fate yet at the same time celebrating her “innate” talent and glorifying her as a “banished immortal.” Although Jin Yi as the ill-fated talented woman fired the imagination of the male literati, significantly, she also seemed to appeal very much to the women of her time. Aside from the fact that those who made the publication of *SYLSG* possible were a group of women, the writings generated by her death also give out a long list of women poets.

We may wonder, then, what led these women as well as men to idealize or “iconize” Jin Yi in the way they did. These “iconizing” efforts may well have been in line with the sweeping influence of the currents of “sentiment.” On the other hand, however, some of the poems that were entitled “Written after Reading *SYLSG*” can be particularly revealing. Wang Zhenyi (1768–1797), a woman poet from Nanjing who did not belong to the circle of Yuan's female disciples and who had never met Jin Yi in person, revealed that she relied exclusively on Jin Yi's works to imagine about her life. Casting the latter as a “banished immortal,” Wang admits: “I have never had the chance to meet or to converse with her [Jin Yi]; Having read [the works she left], I am wrapped up in my thoughts.”<sup>38</sup> Since it was Jin Yi's works that led Wang to imagine her as a banished immortal, the following sections of my article will focus on these works.

### **The Pathographical Act: “Expressing My Feelings While I was Ill”**

What is distinct of the poetic voice in *SYLSG* is that it remains that of an invalid, who has an extremely fragile frame and who falls ill frequently. In fact, disease, or disease-induced physical frailty, serves as the single most important theme in this poetry collection. Even when the titles of the poems are not explicitly related to this theme, the persona of the sickly and “slender reciter” of poems (as the title of the collection indicates) always emerges from the lines to demand our attention—not to mention that Jin Yi entitles a considerable number of her pieces expressly with the word “disease” or “*bing*,” such as: “Bingzhong” (“Written While I was Ill”), “Bingqi” (“Arising from My Sickbed”), “Bingye” (“A Night during My Disease”), or “Bingshen” (“Severely Ill”). As a whole, *SYLSG* delineates a life course of roughly five years (1789–1794, from around the time when Jin Yi got married until the



time of her death) of recurrent onsets of diseases, some lasting as long as three years, some leading to temporary recoveries (eg. “*bingqi*”), or periods of lesser severity, yet soon relapsing into chronic afflictions.

As a poetic theme, disease had long (male) traditions in classical Chinese poetry. In addition to the subgenre of the boudoir poetry that centers on (women’s) lovesickness, male poets also found the theme of (themselves) being ill particularly amenable to the venting of strong feelings, most often their frustrated political ambitions or concerns about the fate of the empire. “Expressing one’s feelings while one was ill” became a popular poem title as early as during the Tang Dynasty. The great Tang master Li Bai (701–762), for instance, exploited this theme in a poem entitled: “Lying in My Sickbed in the South to the Huai River, I Wrote This to Express My Feelings, and Also to Send to Mr. Zhao Zhirui of Sichuan,” precisely for the purpose of venting his lament at a failed career.<sup>39</sup>

In her self-representation as an invalid, Jin Yi explored both of the above writing conventions despite the fact that they had no direct connections with each other. (The only connection that I can think of lies in that, in both writing conventions, poets tended to use the theme of illness metaphorically. That is, “illness” was never limited to the physical condition of being ill, but was often used to represent life travails or emotional torments. For the western reader, this may evoke the concept of “illness as metaphor,” used by the writer Susan Sontag to refer to the culturally-loaded meanings of illness.<sup>40</sup>) I would like to first call attention to how Jin Yi appropriated the theme of “expressing one’s feelings while one was ill.” Rather than engaging in laments of a political nature, as the male poets often did, Jin Yi took the occasion of being ill to reflect on her life course as a woman. An extensive piece by her, entitled precisely “Expressing My Feelings While I was Ill” (*SYLSG*, 1.7b-9a), is immediately eye-catching for several reasons.<sup>41</sup>

First of all, although a number of women poets of Jin Yi’s time also explored the theme for self-expression, rarely do we find in their works such an explicitly-stated autobiographical purpose as in Jin Yi’s.<sup>42</sup> When the writing subject in Jin Yi’s poem—the pronoun “I” which, by the writing conventions, is usually missing in classical Chinese poetry—steps forth to demand the reader’s attention; she makes it clear that she has an entire life story to tell. Moreover, the simple fact of the poem’s length—eighty-four lines, attached with a preface—is a rare phenomenon in women’s poetry of a similar subject and is itself a statement of Jin Yi’s autobiographical energy.

Secondly, either in men’s or in women’s poems about their diseases, rarely are we supplied with such rich details regarding the course of disease as in Jin Yi’s poem. In the sense that the poem demonstrates Jin Yi’s conscious effort to recapture her experience as an invalid and to give meaning to her sufferings, it can be read as a distinctly “pathographical” act—which

"involves the discovery of patterns in experience, the imposition of order, the creation of meaning—all with the purpose of mastering a traumatic experience."<sup>43</sup>

Finally, the poem also stands out for its clear "plot," which is carefully developed to convey a message. If it is not uncommon to detect autobiographical elements in poems about disease by both men and women, it is nonetheless phenomenal to see them evolving, in Jin Yi's poem, into such autobiographical consciousness.

To probe the self-consciousness of Jin Yi's writing, I shall start with her preface to the poem: "For three years, I have been afflicted with sorrow and diseases. During the shift from spring to summer of this year, my disease became so severe that four times, I hovered over the brink of life and death, and it was by a divine power that I was saved from death. Lying in my sickbed, I felt bored, and tens of thousands of thoughts crowded into my mind. I happened to compose this poem. During my grief and self-pity, I was not concerned about whether it is refined or not."<sup>44</sup>

The preface deserves attention not only because it concisely gives out information regarding Jin Yi's disease (namely, its time course, severity, development, "crises," and temporary recess), but, more importantly, because it can tell much about the process of Jin Yi's composition. Just as Stephen Owen revealed about Tao Qian's assertion of spontaneity at every stage of his composition, Jin Yi's emphasis of the elements of whim, accident, and spontaneity—namely, that the poem is an accidental result of her extreme "grief and self-pity," and of the "tens of thousands of thoughts" crowding into her mind, instead of a product of fine craftsmanship—betrays her efforts to exert control over reading from the very beginning.<sup>45</sup> Above all, her stance of feeling no concern about craftsmanship strikes me as a clear effort of urging the reader to accept the sincerity of her feelings—or, more specifically, the message that she intends to convey through the expression of these feelings. Yet in fact, rather than a collection of rambling thoughts, as Jin Yi suggests it is, her poem demonstrates a carefully-crafted pattern.

In Lines 1–10, Jin Yi uses the philosophical thoughts of Zhuangzi (369 B.C.–286 B.C.?) to open her reflections on life. In Lines 11–24, she retraces her life course since the time of her birth, focusing on the ideal companionship of her marriage. Lines 25–36 describe the sudden onset of her disease, its devastating effects, and its "crisis" period when she hovers "over the brink of life and death"—in short, a traumatic experience in the vivid details of its horror:

How would I know that the Principle of the Creator;  
Is to distribute joy and worry in turns.  
At dawn I was as frozen as if I'd tread on ice;

At dusk I was burning hot as if in a fiery oven.  
 Ghosts gathered around my medicine jars;  
 At night they walked along my bed curtains.  
 Trying to speak, I couldn't find my voice;  
 And only gasped in my throat.  
 My heart was broken and my tears dried up;  
 My breath constricted, and my mind and soul lost from my control.  
 Our affections were lost within a second;  
 How dare I ever expect to be well again!<sup>46</sup>

Read against the preceding text, the horror of this unnamed disease emerges first and foremost as the unexpected devastation of the perfect happiness of Jin Yi's marriage, which leads her to cherish even more the affections she shares with her husband (Line 35). The following text, then, develops along this line to represent Jin Yi's recovery as the restoration of such affections. During what can be identified as a religious experience, a divine power rescued her—most probably by the Bodhisattva Guanyin (Line 39), the popular Buddhist deity known for her compassion for human suffering—comes back to life to see her husband by the bedside, and listens to him with “immeasurable” sorrow and joy while he describes to her how ill she has been (Lines 37–48).<sup>47</sup>

Yet just as Jin Yi starts to recover and to enjoy the leisure accorded by the recess of her disease (Lines 49–57), the line of her story shifts. She hears the distress of another woman:

Leaning on my pillows, I felt at ease and at leisure;  
 All of a sudden, I was alarmed by sounds of weeping.  
 I urged the person to come close;  
 And eagerly enquired about her misery many times.  
 The old woman told me, “My husband worked so hard;  
 And was suddenly stricken with wind and chill.  
 Now he's been bedridden for two months;  
 How could I pay off the debts?  
 If my life has already come to this;  
 Indeed how could death be worse?”<sup>48</sup>

It is just as the story seems to be digressing into a story about another couple, and of a totally different nature, that the chance arises for Jin Yi to foreground her own romantic sentiments:

Hearing this I gave a deep sigh;  
 This old woman is really stupid!  
 Poverty is not worth concern;  
 And what is there about wealth to hail?

...

To experience few separations in life:  
Can there be any greater joy than this?  
With white hair the couple still stay together;  
Finding pleasure in even the simplest life.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, the point where the two stories cross lines manifests glaring contrasts. Jin Yi, with her elite background, easily dismisses the old woman who is clearly from a much humbler background as being “stupid,” and the latter’s financial concerns trivial. Whereas the old woman is willing to embrace death in the face of life’s hardships, Jin Yi, who is herself on her deathbed, aspires to life for its bliss of romantic companionship. “Can there be any greater joy” than “[t]o experience few separations in life?” Concerns about poverty and debts are nothing but vulgar before this proclamation of passion. To further highlight this message of romantic passion, as well as her own disdain of wealth, Jin Yi makes the generous gesture of giving up her wedding jewelry to the old woman, as a means of helping the latter out of her financial straits (Lines 79–80). In short, in bringing in an “other” of herself, Jin Yi effectively carves a better shape out of her traumatic experience, endowing it with meanings far exceeding the disease itself.

It is also at this moment that Jin Yi expands her message of romantic passion to the meaning of life in general. Her return to Zhuangzi in Lines 77–78 serves not only as her comment on the old woman but as a sort of “enlightenment,” a solution to her reflections on life that she presents at the beginning. The poem, then, ends in a moment of peace, which signifies both the temporary recess of Jin Yi’s disease and her peaceful state of mind reached by her “enlightenment” (lines 81–84). Thus, a detailed account of the course of a disease—including its onset, crisis, and recess—is framed finely within an account of a life course and within what Jin Yi proclaims to be the meaning of life, namely, the intense passion (the “*qing*”) that is going to reverberate throughout her poetry collection.

### Enacting the Romantic Heroine

In this part of my article, I will not be tracing the ups and downs of Jin Yi’s story according to the onsets and recesses of her disease during the last five years of her life, but will rather focus on how she bends facts of her poor health towards the end of crafting a self-image that closely resembles the romantic heroine Lin Daiyu. Her enactment of this fragile, sickly, and glamorous character relies very much on her engagement with the boudoir poetry. Yet her self-exhibition, I argue, may sometimes call for interpretations that point to the very opposite of this poetic tradition.

Take, for example, a quatrain in a long series of Jin Yi’s poems portraying her life “in the boudoir”:

The screen of the boudoir fails to keep out the breeze;  
 This emaciated me is called "Fragile."<sup>50</sup>  
 Measuring my own waist, I find it only twelve inches;  
 A touch of spring chill will aggravate my disease.<sup>51</sup>

The eroticism that both Robertson and Fong noted in the boudoir poetry is, admittedly, not lost in Jin Yi's poem. However, it also takes a dramatic turn in that the languishing beauty objectified by the male gaze transforms here into the "emaciated me"—the woman who derives pleasure from measuring her own slender waist and exposing the allure of her own body. Jin Yi's appropriation of the "gaze" for self-exhibition, therefore, inserts a subtle yet potentially radical change into this poetic tradition, suggesting that a woman poet does not always have to de-eroticize the boudoir—changing it into quarters of female companionship, for example—in order to assert her subjectivity. Such self-exhibition, most importantly, exemplifies how Jin Yi consciously bends the fact of her disease towards the purpose of her self-creation. Rather than an effect of the torments of disease, her emaciation is cast as her very appeal.

Indeed, if we find how obsessed Jin Yi is with her physical appeal, we may have a sense of its centrality in her self-perception. She claims that even the mirror would "know to pity" her fragile shadow (SYLSG 1.2b); indulges in even more explicit self-pity as she looks at her portrait (SYLSG 1.11b); draws attention to her "fragile hands" as she poses in the beautiful stance of reaching out for a flower twig (SYLSG 2.14b); and provokes the reader to imagine what words can hardly describe as she arises from her sickbed (SYLSG 4.1a).<sup>52</sup> Even with the excuse of imitating the erotic language of the male poets, some of these lines would still be an outright transgression of the bounds of "propriety" for a gentry woman.

This degree of sensuality, according to Fong, is "uncharacteristic of gentry wives' poetry" and is more likely to be found in poetry by lower-status women such as the literate concubines.<sup>53</sup> In her study of Shen Cai, one of these literate concubines from the eighteenth century, Fong attributes the "unabashedly feminine self" that she spots in some of Shen's erotic poems—namely, Shen's casting of herself in the image of the woman of the boudoir—to the latter's self-consciousness, as a concubine, of being an erotic object, and to the fact that "as a concubine, she [Shen] takes greater liberties in her writing, moving beyond the normative constraints of feminine virtue and propriety." To demonstrate the agency that Shen could exert, Fong further traces Shen's subversion of the boudoir poetry by the means of, for instance, "making fun of the artificiality of the erotic," or of transforming the love-laden boudoir into a place for "meaningful cultural activities" such as reading, practicing calligraphy, and composing verses.<sup>54</sup> While Fong's is a useful approach to reveal how a woman could deconstruct,

as she phrases it, the boudoir poetry, there remains an alternative way of looking at a woman's works that fall out of the category of visible change or subversion, as I endeavor to prove with my present discussion of Jin Yi. The very fact that Jin Yi (as the principal wife rather than a concubine) should indulge in outright transgressions of the propriety expected of gentry wives indicates no less "agency," indeed, than the case of the concubine who subverts the eroticism of the boudoir.

Jin Yi's obsession with her own appeal is, more importantly, integral to her enactment of the romantic heroine, and the appeal does not stop with the physical. Either in the boudoir poetry or in drama and fiction around Jin Yi's time, the physical frailty or emaciation of a beautiful woman often connotes a consuming passion that further enhances her appeal. Readers of *Dream of the Red Chamber* would recall, for example, a famous scene in the novel that puts Lin Daiyu at her most glamorous—attributing her rosy cheeks to the passion burning inside her, and suggesting at the same time the start of a severe disease.<sup>55</sup> It is by associating her disease and physical frailty with a consuming passion that Jin Yi enacts the romantic heroine—as in a quatrain that refers allegedly to the "sick butterfly" yet really to herself:

She cannot bear leaving the grass as she is about to fly away;  
Her lovely shadow hovers over the grass.  
Her passion, she knows, is undying;  
Though languishing, she is always longing for love.<sup>56</sup>

As a standard expression for romantic passion, the phrase "*chunxin*" or "spring sentiments" in the original words, which I translate as "passion," defines what is at issue here. The "sickness" that the poem brings up is nothing other than the "spring sickness" that, in the boudoir poetry, always afflicts the woman longing for love. Clearly it is not the butterfly who is suffering from this lovesickness but Jin Yi herself.

"Spring sickness" persists in Jin Yi's characterization of her disease, and is written into her correspondences with her mentor Yuan Mei and with the circle of Yuan's female disciples—even when the context suggests the very opposite of a "sentimental" sickness: "On the Fourteenth Day of the Fifth Month during the year Renzi [1792], the ladies gathered together to hold a banquet at the Xiugu Garden, composing poems in honor of Mr. Yuan Mei when he was about to return to Nanjing. At that time, I was severely ill, and was therefore unable to join their gathering. As a request from the two ladies Zhou Lilan and Jin Xiangzhi, I later composed two poems to dedicate to Mr. Yuan."<sup>57</sup> In the body of her poems, then, Jin Yi greets her mentor and apologizes for her absence—qualifying, nonetheless, her situation as: "My sorrow and disease since the spring are nothing but 'spring languor.'"<sup>58</sup>

Only another variation of “spring sentiments” or “spring sickness,” the phrase “spring languor” broadcasts (consider the occasion of the composition) a glamorized image of Jin Yi as a woman languishing for love. If, as the literary scholar Katherine R. Goodman argues, autobiographical writings are not characterized by “fiction” only but rather by the “tension between the assertion of reality and the conscious creation of fiction,” here, then, we can witness just the same tension, and it is such tension that tells the most about Jin Yi’s autobiographical consciousness.<sup>59</sup> That is, even as she informs her mentor and the circle of her peers that she is physically too ill to join their gathering, she would still like them to see in her disease a significance that exceeds the horrid reality of bodily pain.

For another example in a poem that answers the enquiries about her disease (or “*xunbing*” poems) from two of her literati friends, Jin Yi communicates the same glamorized image of herself:

I am afflicted with the ill fate of the flower and with a slight disease;  
My spring sentiments fill the air like the willow catkins.<sup>60</sup>

The image of the ill-fated beauty comparing her fate to that of the flower evokes immediately the highly sensitive Lin Daiyu who, in the novel, mourns the fate of the fallen blossoms.<sup>61</sup> Compared with the torture of passion or “spring sentiments,” which is exactly what Lin Daiyu suffers from in the novel, Jin Yi claims that her actual disease is only “slight.”

Indeed, for Jin Yi the word “disease” or “*bing*” bears within itself a direct connection with the sentiments of “sorrow” and “passion,” so that its bodily effects are constantly suppressed:

Medicines are wasted on me, my sorrow is not cured;  
In vain have people called me Du Lanxiang!<sup>62</sup>

Do not say that I’ve been born with the burden of sorrow;  
Without profound passion one cannot understand sorrow.<sup>63</sup>

The first quotation above makes it clear that it is not the disease *per se* that is incurable, but “sorrow.” Yet to suffer from this perennial “burden of sorrow,” Jin Yi asserts in the second quotation, signifies the innate gift of passion or “*qing*,” here a quality that enables one to appreciate the exalted sentiments of “sorrow.” Elsewhere Jin Yi virtually turns her “obsession with passion” or “*qingchi*” into a euphemism for the chronic condition of her disease, and claims that it is her “obsession with that one character” (“that one character” meaning “passion”) that she cannot rid herself of.<sup>64</sup> In this expressed equation of the bodily with the sentimental, “disease,” “sorrow,” and “passion” all become interchangeable attributes—the very attributes that draw Jin Yi close to the character Lin Daiyu. The fact that Jin

Yi is writing to her influential literati friends here (see notes to the quotations) further reveals her intention to broadcast her enactment of Lin Daiyu.

No wonder, then, that Jin Yi also explicitly identifies herself with Lin Daiyu:

Written on a Chilly Night Waiting for Zhushi, Who Did Not Return,  
and Reading *Dream of the Red Chamber*

The impending snow brings nipping chill;  
The incenses, twisting and turning, vanish from the agate plate.  
I throw off my dreams and rise from bed, having waited for you;  
And read my borrowed book, having no means to dispel my sorrow.  
How could passion persist with such depth—  
Overwhelmed by love [she] would give up even life.  
Pearl tears being dried up, [she] still says they are few;<sup>65</sup>  
Pondering on all this, I'm amazed how much this has to do with me!<sup>66</sup>

As the literary scholar Ellen Widmer notes, Jin Yi was among the first women who wrote on *Dream of the Red Chamber*.<sup>67</sup> First published in the year of 1791, yet having been circulating in manuscript form since around mid-eighteenth century, the novel was a tremendous success among its elite readers, and there is evidence that it also reached quite a number of gentry women either around Jin Yi's time or during the nineteenth century—inspiring them to adapt its themes to drama, or to take up fiction writing.<sup>68</sup> Rarely, however, do we find these women drawing explicit parallels between their own lives and that of the heroine Lin Daiyu. Jin Yi's above identification with Lin Daiyu stands out therefore as evidence for the novel's direct influence on a woman's self-perception—namely, how its predominant theme of passion could inspire a woman to endow her own life with a significance.

Notable also is the fact that, like a considerable number of the poems in *SYLSG*, the above poem is addressed to Chen Ji, Jin Yi's husband. Namely, it is to the "you" that Jin Yi's passionate lines are directed. Nothing short of a confession of passion, the poem marks Jin Yi's efforts to enact the powerful story of passion told by the novel.

### **Dream of Past Karma: Mythifying Passion**

A dream event that is recorded by both *SYLSG* and *SYNDZSX* dramatically mythifies Jin Yi's enactment of passion.<sup>69</sup> As Jin Yi relates, it took place while her husband went to Wujiang, a neighboring county, to buy medicine for her after she had another severe attack of disease. At the moment, she was staying in her natal home for medical care, waiting for her husband to come back:



I longed to see him, so I lighted the lamp and sat in sorrow . . . As if in a trance I fell in sleep with my clothes still on me. Someone urged me: "Get up, get up!" So I got up and followed him/her. I was stepping on something that was neither fog nor mist, and I could not stay on it. After a while I arrived at a mansion. . . . Someone said to me: "Your talented husband is here." I listened carefully and caught vague sounds of someone chanting poetry. The person said again: "Why don't you compose a poem to get him to you?" Just while I was standing there, trying to get some idea for my composition, my mother pulled a robe over me and I woke up by a start . . . I forced myself to get up early in the morning, took up the brush and composed three quatrains.<sup>70</sup>

Full of uncertainties that do seem to characterize dreams, this part of the account nevertheless conveys a clear message. Longing to see her husband, Jin Yi is brought to a rendezvous with him in her dream. The detail about poetry chanting and poetry composition echoes the stock representation in romantic fictions of the time of how a young scholar and a beauty fall in love, yet also reflects the "companionate marriage" of Jin Yi and Chen Ji, in that they did often exchange poetry with each other.

The following part of the account gives mystery to the dream event. It turned out that, while he was in Wujiang, Chen Ji met a female planchetter who also composed three quatrains.<sup>71</sup> After Chen came home, the couple took out the poems for each other to read, and found that Jin Yi and the planchetter Hu Gui'e used exactly the same rhymes as if they had been responding to each other. Marveling at the "coincidence," Jin Yi composed another three quatrains to respond to the planchetter, and exclaimed: "This also counts as a sensational event in the circle of poets!"<sup>72</sup>

The true significance of the "coincidence"—indeed, what counts as "sensational"—will not reveal itself unless we read the poems that follow the account. For instance, the couplets from the third quatrain by Jin Yi and from the third by the planchetter are truly "coincidentally" similar in that they both center on the occasion of Jin Yi's composition:

For several times, I tried to sleep yet had to get up;  
Mingled with my sorrow and my dream are my newly composed lines.<sup>73</sup>

The gracious rain is filled with too much love to let you leave;  
Thus it induces the one in the boudoir to write about her longing  
for the one who is afar.<sup>74</sup>

The former quotation echoes the beginning of the account and explains Jin Yi's composition as a result of her insomnia and "sorrow," which are, in

turn, the result of her longing. By comparison, the latter quotation specifies what has caused such sorrow and longing of Jin Yi in the first place, namely, the rain that has retained Chen Ji in Wujiang. Furthermore, by defining Jin Yi as "the one in the boudoir," it captures the exact nature of her composition, namely, passionate lines about her longing. Read side by side, the two quotations not only illustrate the "coincidence" but also strengthen the message of passion suggested in the first half of Jin Yi's account.

A clear clue emerges then from the poems to generate a myth of passion. Take, for example, the quatrains that figure the first in each of the three categories of poems that follow the account (i.e. poems written by Jin Yi after waking from her dream; those written by the planchette; and those written by Jin Yi as responses to the planchette):

I knew I was looking for a village by a river while I dreamt of a distant land;  
The clouds were thin, and the rains drizzling.  
How was it that we were thousands of miles apart, with mountains and passes between us?  
My heart was broken after a whole night's longing.<sup>75</sup>

The old roots of passion that grew on the Rock of Three Lives—<sup>76</sup>  
They sprout like the grass after the rain.  
Staying away from home, even just for one night, makes [you] a traveler;  
The sounds of the wind and shadows of the moon easily overwhelm [her] spirit.<sup>77</sup>

I have realized that the roots of passion are the roots of wisdom;  
As I read through these poems, smiles smoothed my brow.  
Who sent the messenger Wuyang from the Ninth Heaven—<sup>78</sup>  
In order to gather this soul of mine?<sup>79</sup>

In the first quotation, Jin Yi recaptures her dream scene, taking it as the occasion to voice her longing for her husband. We may realize that this confession of passion is way too hyperbolic, since Chen Ji's trip that is represented as breaking Jin Yi's heart and creating "thousands of miles" and "mountains and passes" between them is only to the neighboring county.

For the planchette, Jin Yi's apparently hyperbolic grief is no surprise because it can be easily attributed to her mythical attachment to her husband. The second quotation becomes a revelation about Jin Yi's past life, namely, her undying roots of passion and her Karmic bonds with her husband. The grass imagery, in particular, is reminiscent of Lin Daiyu, who is in her former life the "Crimson Pearl Grass" that grows just by the Rock of Three Lives. It is the male protagonist Jia Baoyu, in his former life a servant in the celestial palace, who saves her life by watering her every day, in this sense

making her “roots of passion” burgeon again.<sup>80</sup> What defines the myth of passion in *Dream of the Red Chamber* thus comes to define the bonds between Jin Yi and her husband.

The phrase “I have realized” that opens the third quotation indicates Jin Yi’s confirmation of the planchette’s message. Jin Yi’s equaling of her “roots of passion” with her “roots of wisdom,” significantly, does not suggest that she has attained the Buddhist enlightenment that frees her from her attachment to passion. On the contrary, in line with the currents of “sentiment,” Jin Yi is here suggesting that passion itself has the enlightening power.<sup>81</sup> As we witness her shifting to a much more cheerful tone when she comes to her realization of the Karmic roots of her passion, we also witness her efforts to identify the mythic power that, in her dream, takes her soul to her rendezvous. What makes these lines particularly interesting lies in that, in interpreting her dream as the consequence of her soul being called away, Jin Yi evokes one of the most compelling images in late imperial Chinese drama, namely, the romantic heroine whose soul departs from her body to pursue the object of her heart’s desire.<sup>82</sup> A “sensational event,” indeed, arises out of the mythic elements of plancheting, coincidence, Karmic bonds, and the departed soul, to transform the dream into a myth of passion.

### Concluding Remarks

To recall Jin Yi’s deathbed wish that her literary reputation live beyond human mortality—we need only to take a quick look at the writings in memory of her to realize that this wish came true. We realize, at the same time, that this wish relied at least as much on Jin Yi’s own efforts as on the “iconizing” efforts of her contemporaries to come true. From the attention she paid to the preservation of her manuscripts on her deathbed, we may gather how much these manuscripts meant to her. Instead of burning them, as the character Lin Daiyu does to her own in one of the most poignant scenes of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Jin Yi looked to these very manuscripts to establish, and broadcast, an iconic image of herself that closely resembles Lin Daiyu.<sup>83</sup> We also become aware of the success of Jin Yi’s efforts, when a woman poet like Wang Zhenyi informs us of the effect that these writings achieve. Writing, as the historian Zuo (502B.C.–422B.C.?) predicted, made one “immortal.”<sup>84</sup> In the case of Jin Yi, writing a fatal disease into a myth of passion served as her “self-iconizing” project.

This “self-iconizing” project, as my close readings of some of Jin Yi’s works have shown, involved dynamic dialogues she had with the male poetic tradition and with the prevailing male sentiments of her time. It is the paradoxical nature of these dialogues that may open an alternative way of looking at women’s efforts of seeking a voice of their own. What can be

easily dismissed as Jin Yi's internalization of the male discourses carries nonetheless elements indicating the very contrary. That is, she consciously appropriated these discourses to the best advantage of her self-creation.

In a recent article that reflects on the literary authorship of late imperial Chinese women, Robertson borrows the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "minor literature" to characterize these women's assertion of their "difference." Namely, in employing a literary language that represented the "majority's" (i.e. the male poets') consciousness and expressive needs, these women could nevertheless use it "with strategic differences" in order to articulate their own concerns, and to "implicitly change the meaning of the established majority canon, with the intrusion and existence of 'difference from.'"<sup>85</sup> Useful as it is, this approach bears in itself the implication that, for women's poetry to be meaningful, it needs to assert (at least a certain degree of) "difference"—be it the deconstructive comic effect, the de-eroticization of the boudoir, or the reversion of the "gaze," as both Robertson and Fong have forcefully argued. Yet when we confront a woman poet like Jin Yi, this standard based on the assertion of "difference," or the articulation of "women's own concerns," may not apply.

After all, a much greater portion of poetry by women stands closer to the other end of the continuum of differing positions that Robertson finds among the women poets, namely, the end of few visible changes. Do we read it as a bulk of poetic exercises or, at best, of the women's unsuccessful attempts at seeking a voice of their own? If the case of Jin Yi tells us that to glorify oneself as the cultural ideal of the century indicates no such unsuccessful attempts—particularly the fact that she was bending the horrid reality of a fatal disease towards this glorifying end—we will realize that her "self-iconizing" project was but a different, yet no less compelling, form of self-assertion. In this sense also—to return to the iconized women as mouthpieces of male sentiments—the complexity and dynamism of women's writing culture in late imperial China well exceed a single paradigm of male influences or male manipulation, and call for our recognition of the efforts of those women who negotiated their ways into the cultural memory of their times.

## NOTES

I am grateful for the constructive comments of the two anonymous readers of JWH. I would also like to thank Professor Beata Grant, my former dissertation advisor at Washington University, for her continuing support.

<sup>1</sup>For studies on the discourse of sentiment in late imperial China, see: Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Martin

W. Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Anthony C. Yu, *Rereading the Stone: Desire and the Making of Fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997). For discussions on the creation of the “icons” of sentiment, see: Anne Gerritsen, “The Many Guises of Xiaoluan: The Legacy of a Girl Poet in Late Imperial China,” *Journal of Women’s History* 17, no. 2 (2005): 38–61; Paul Ropp, *Banished Immortal: Searching for Shuangqing, China’s Peasant Woman Poet* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001); Ellen Widmer, “Xiaoqing’s Literary Legacy and the Place of the Woman Writer in Late Imperial China,” *Late Imperial China* 13, no. 1 (1992): 111–55.

<sup>2</sup>Widmer, “Xiaoqing’s Literary Legacy,” 128–30.

<sup>3</sup>See Ropp’s summary of scholarship concerning the “authenticity” of He Shuangqing. Ropp, *Banished Immortal*, 192–204.

<sup>4</sup>Gerritsen, 56.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>For the most recent works in this area, see: Grace S. Fong, *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Ellen Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book: Women and Fiction in Nineteenth-Century China* (Cambridge: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2006).

<sup>7</sup>Mann, *The Talented Women*, 168.

<sup>8</sup>Stephen Owen, “The Self’s Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography,” in *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice: Shi Poetry from the Late Han to the T’ang*, eds. Shuen-fu Lin and Stephen Owen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 71–102. See particularly page 79.

<sup>9</sup>Fong, *Herself an Author*, 9–53.

<sup>10</sup>Maureen Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China,” *Late Imperial China* 13, no. 1 (1992): 63–110. See particularly page 94.

<sup>11</sup>Robertson, “Changing the Subject: Gender and Self-inscription in Authors’ Prefaces and ‘Shi’ Poetry,” in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, eds. Ellen Widmer and Kang-I Sun Chang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 171–217.

<sup>12</sup>Paul Rouzer, *Articulated Ladies: Gender and the Male Community in Early Chinese Texts* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 130–56.

<sup>13</sup>Robertson, “Voicing the Feminine,” 82 and “Changing the Subject,” 200.

<sup>14</sup>Robertson, “Changing the Subject,” 208.

<sup>15</sup>For an introduction to Jin Yi as one of the most important figures among Qing-Dynasty women poets, see: Zhong Huiling, *Qingdai nüshiren yanjiu (A Study of Qing-Dynasty Women Poets)* (Taipei: Liren shuju, 2000), 402–27.

<sup>16</sup>These writings give out a long list of illustrious scholars and poets including Yuan Mei, Chen Wenshu (1771–1843), Wang Wenzhi (1730–1802), Wu Songliang (1766–1834), and Guo Lin (1767–1831), in addition to a large group of Yuan Mei's female disciples.

<sup>17</sup>Cao Xueqin and Gao E, *Honglou meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, reprinted 1982).

<sup>18</sup>A "courtesy name" or "zi" was an alternative given name to be addressed by family members, friends, or acquaintances. A "style name" or "hao" was a self-chosen name and was often used in the circle of literati.

<sup>19</sup>Chen Wenshu, "Biography of Jin Yi," in Jin Yi, *Shouyinlou shigao* (*Poetry Drafts from the Tower of the Slender Reciter*, hereafter SYLSG), "Biography" 1a–3b.

<sup>20</sup>Jin, SYLSG, 1.7b.

<sup>21</sup>Chen Wenshu, 1b.

<sup>22</sup>Yuan Mei, "Epitaph for Lady Jin Xianxian", 32.10b.

<sup>23</sup>Chen Wenshu, 2a. Yuan Mei, "Epitaph for Lady Jin Xianxian", 32.10b.

<sup>24</sup>Chen Wenshu, 2a.

<sup>25</sup>Zhong, 224. Also see Zhong's reproduction of the scroll that includes Jin Yi: Zhong, "Illustration," No. 5.

<sup>26</sup>SYLSG records over thirty of Jin Yi's connections, including both men and women.

<sup>27</sup>For instances, see the poems that Jin Yi exchanged with Guo Lin, Yan Shou-tian (a government official), and Wu Songliang. Yuan Mei, ed. *Suiyuan nüdzizi shixuan* (*Selected Poems by Yuan Mei's Female Disciples*, hereafter SYNDZSX), 2.6a–b; 2.8a.

<sup>28</sup>Wang Qiong, *Ailan shichao* (*Poetry by Wang Qiong*), in *Wuzhong nüshi shichao* (*Anthology of Poetry by Gentry Women in the Wu Area [around Suzhou], 1789*), "Preface" 1a; 6b; 7a–8b; 9b; 12a; 17a.

<sup>29</sup>The complete version of the collection is now held by the National Library of China.

<sup>30</sup>*Guochao guixiu zhengshiji*, 14.19a–20b. *Guochao guige shichao*, 7.24a–29b.

<sup>31</sup>Wu, "Elegy for Lady Xianxian," in SYNDZSX, 2.9b.

<sup>32</sup>Li Peijin was known to excel in the art of "ci" poetry or song lyrics. See: Li Mingwan and Feng Guifen, eds. *The Suzhou Gazetteer*, 119.30a.

<sup>33</sup>Li Yuankai, "Epilogue," SYLSG, "Epilogue" 1a–b.

<sup>34</sup>Yuan Mei, "Epitaph for Lady Jin Xianxian", 32.11a.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid. Here I use the translation by Mark A. Borer. Yuan Mei, "Epitaph for Lady Jin Xianxian," trans. Mark A. Borer, in *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*, eds. Kang-I Sun Chang and Haun Saussy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 779.

<sup>36</sup>The trope of the "banished immortal" implies that the talent of the poet is "innate"—brought from his past life as an immortal—and that his early death suggests the end of his banishment and, therefore, his return to the immortal world. Judith Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 68–71.

<sup>37</sup>Epstein, 118.

<sup>38</sup>Wang Zhenyi, "Du Wuzhong nüshi Jin Xianxian yishi gan fu erlü" ("Having Read the Poems Left by Lady Jin Xianxian from Wuzhong, I Wrote My Feelings into Two Poems"), *Defengting chuji* (*An Initial Collection from the Dengfeng Pavilion*, 1916), 12.13 a–b.

<sup>39</sup>See: Cao Yin and Peng Dingqiu, comp. *Quan Tang shi* (*The Complete Anthology of the Tang Poetry*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, reprinted 1997), 1771.

<sup>40</sup>Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

<sup>41</sup>Jin, SYLSG, 1.7b–9a.

<sup>42</sup>For a general discussion of women's poetry on illness in late imperial China, see: Fong, "Writing and Illness: A Feminine Condition in Women's Poetry of the Ming and Qing," in *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing*, eds. Grace S. Fong and Ellen Widmer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 19–48.

<sup>43</sup>Anne H. Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), 24. In borrowing the concept of pathography, I intend to bring fresh theoretical perspectives to my discussion of the ways Jin Yi created meaning and order for her experience.

<sup>44</sup>Jin, SYLSG 1.7b. See Appendix.

<sup>45</sup>Owen, "The Self's Perfect Mirror," 79.

<sup>46</sup>Jin, SYLSG 1.8a–b.

<sup>47</sup>For a discussion of how women in late imperial China resorted to Buddhism for cure or for solace while they were ill, see: Chen Yunü, "Buddhism and the Medical Treatment of Women in the Ming Dynasty: A Research Note," *NanNü: Men, Women, and Gender in China* 10, 2 (2008): 279–304.

<sup>48</sup>Jin, SYLSG 1.8b.

<sup>49</sup>Jin, SYLSG 1.9a.

<sup>50</sup>The courtesy name of Jin Yi, Xianxian, literally means "Fragile."

<sup>51</sup>Jin, "Guizhong zayong" ("Miscellaneous Poems Written in the Boudoir") No.1, SYLSG 3.5a.

<sup>52</sup>Jin, SYLSG 1.2b; SYLSG 1.11b; SYLSG 2.14b; SYLSG 4.1a.

<sup>53</sup>Fong, *Herself an Author*, 8.

<sup>54</sup>Fong, *Herself an Author*, 75–81.

<sup>55</sup>Cao and Gao, *Honglou meng*, 457.

<sup>56</sup>Jin, "Bingdie" ("The Sick Butterfly"), SYLSG 1.2b.

<sup>57</sup>Jin, SYLSG 1.10a.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Katherine R. Goodman, "Book Review: *Autobiography and Questions of Gender* by Shirley Neuman, *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* by Marlene Kadar, *Colette and the Fantom Subject of Autobiography* by Jerry Aline Flieger, and *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* by Susan Sniader Lanser," *Signs* 20, no. 3 (1995): 770–775. See particularly page 772.

<sup>60</sup>The poem is addressed to Guo Lin and Jiang Yinpei (poet, and county magistrate of Tai'an, Jiangsu Province). Jin, SYLSG 3.3a.

<sup>61</sup>Cao and Gao, *Honglou meng*, 370–1.

<sup>62</sup>The couplet is from a poem addressed to Xie Qikun (1737-1802, an influential poet and scholar who assumed several important official posts) and his wife. Jin, SYLSG 4.12a. Du Lanxiang was a legendary female immortal, the story of whom can be found in hagiographies of the Tang Dynasty.

<sup>63</sup>The couplet is from one of Jin Yi's responses to Guo Lin. Jin, SYLSG, 3.1a–b.

<sup>64</sup>For instances: Jin, SYLSG, 2.4b; 3.7a.

<sup>65</sup>This is a clear reference to Lin Daiyu. Cao and Gao, *Honglou meng*, 9.

<sup>66</sup>Jin, SYLSG, 4.4b.

<sup>67</sup>Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book*, 22.

<sup>68</sup>See: Hua Wei, *Ming Qing funü zhi xiqu chuanguo yu piping* (*Drama and Criticisms on Drama by Women of the Ming and Qing Periods*) (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan wenzhe suo, 2003), 70-82. Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book*, 181–248.

<sup>69</sup>SYNDZSX selects only the first two quatrains by Jin Yi. Yuan, comp., SYNDZSX, 2.7a.

<sup>70</sup>Jin, SYLSG, 2.9a.

<sup>71</sup>Planchetting refers to a form of spirit writing that became popular as early as during the Song Dynasty (960–1279), when people believed that the "Purple



Goddess," or Zigu, would descend to leave meaningful patterns or characters on the planchette through the hands of a practitioner. In my discussion, the planchetter Hu Gui'e refers to the name of the practitioner of planchetting.

<sup>72</sup>Jin, *SYLSG*, 2.9a.

<sup>73</sup>Jin, *SYLSG*, 2.10a.

<sup>74</sup>Hu Gui'e, in *SYLSG*, 2.11a.

<sup>75</sup>Jin, *SYLSG*, 2.10a.

<sup>76</sup>The "Rock of Three Lives" alludes to the Buddhist idea of reincarnation.

<sup>77</sup>Hu Gui'e, in *SYLSG*, 2.10b.

<sup>78</sup>Wuyang was a legendary sorcerer who appears in the *Chuci* or *Songs of Chu* (4c. B.C.).

<sup>79</sup>Jin, *SYLSG*, 2.10b.

<sup>80</sup>Cao and Gao, *Honglou meng*, 8–9.

<sup>81</sup>For instance, see the famous seventeenth-century writer Feng Menglong's manifestos on the edifying and enlightening power of passion: Feng, *Qingshi* (*A History of Passion*) (Shenyang, China: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, reprinted 1986), "Prefaces."

<sup>82</sup>See Zeitlin's extensive study of this image. Zeitlin, 131–97.

<sup>83</sup>Cao and Gao, *Honglou meng*, 1338–9.

<sup>84</sup>It is the one of the most famous claims of the *Zuozhuan* or *Records of Zuo* that there are three means by which a gentleman could achieve immortal reputation, namely, by establishing his "virtue," his "feat," and his "words."

<sup>85</sup>Robertson, "Literary Authorship by Late Imperial Governing-Class Chinese Women and the Emergence of a 'Minor Literature,'" in *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing*, eds. Grace S. Fong and Ellen Widmer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 381–3.

## GLOSSARY

- Bao Zhihui 鮑之蕙  
 bieji 別集  
 bing 病  
 "Bingqi" 病起  
 "Bingshen" 病甚  
 "Bingye" 病夜  
 "Bingzhong" 病中  
 Chen Ji 陳基  
 Chen Wenshu 陳文述  
 Chen Xuelan 陳雪蘭  
 Chuci 楚辭  
 chunxin 春心  
 Du Lanxiang 杜蘭香  
 Feng Xiaoqing 馮小青  
 Feng Menglong 馮夢龍  
 Gan Lirou 甘立媠  
 Gui Maoyi 歸懋儀  
 Guochao guige shichao 國朝閨閣詩鈔  
 Guochao guixiu zhengshiji 國朝閨秀正始集  
 Guo Lin 郭麐  
 He Shuangqing 賀雙卿  
 Honglou meng 紅樓夢  
 Hu Gui'e 胡桂娥  
 huaigu 懷古  
 jijiu 祭酒  
 Jiang Zhu 江珠  
 Jin Xiangzhi 金湘芷  
 Jin Yi 金逸  
 Li Peijin 李佩金  
 Li Yuankai 李元塏  
 Lin Daiyu 林黛玉  
 Lu Yuansu 盧元素  
 Luo Qilan 駱綺蘭  
 qing 情  
 qingchi 情癡  
 Qingshi 情史  
 Qu Bingyun 屈秉筠  
 Shen Shanbao 沈善寶  
 Shen Xiang 沈纘  
 shi yan zhi 詩言志

Shi Zhenlin 史震林  
*Shouyinlou shigao* 瘦吟樓詩稿  
*Suiyuan nudizi shixuan* 隨園女弟子詩選  
Tao Qian 陶潛  
Wang Qiong 王瓊  
Wang Wenzhi 王文治  
Wang Yuzhen 汪玉軫  
Wang Zhenyi 王貞儀  
Wujiang 吳江  
Wu Qiongxian 吳瓊仙  
Wu Songliang 吳嵩梁  
Wuxian 吳縣  
Wuyang 巫陽  
*Wuzhong nushi shichao* 吳中女士詩鈔  
Xi Peilan 席佩蘭  
Xianxian 織織  
Xianxian nushi 仙仙女史  
Xie Qikun 謝啟昆  
xunbing 訊病  
Yan Shoutian 嚴守田  
Yang Fangcan 楊芳燦  
Yang Ruiyuan 楊蕊淵  
Ye Xiaoluan 葉小鸞  
yongshi 詠史  
You Jixiang 尤寄湘  
youxian 遊仙  
*Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠  
Yuan Mei 袁枚  
Yuan Xixie 袁希謝  
Zhang Yuzhen 張玉珍  
Zhou Lilan 周澧蘭  
Zhuangzi 莊子  
Zhushi 竹士  
Zigu 紫姑  
*Zuozhuan* 左傳

## Appendix

### Expressing My Feelings While I Was Ill 病中述懷

#### Preface

For three years, I have been afflicted with sorrow and diseases. During the shift from spring to summer of this year, my disease became so severe that four times, I hovered over the brink of life and death, and it was by a divine power that I was saved from death. Lying in my sickbed, I felt bored, and tens of thousands of thoughts crowded into my mind. I happened to compose this poem. During my grief and self-pity, I was not concerned about whether it is refined or not.

余三載來愁病纏綿，今年春夏交尤甚，瀕危者數四，賴神力得不死。臥病無聊，萬緒縈觸，偶得詩一章。惻楚自憐，工拙在所不計也。

When I climb up the mountain, the clouds are below; 上山雲在下, 1  
When I walk down the mountain, the clouds are above. 下山雲在上。  
The clouds are mindless; 白雲本無心，  
They shift as I move. 上下從吾往。  
While I look around in this universe; 縱覽宇宙間, 5  
I see things flourishing and declining in a variety of forms. 衰榮非一狀。  
Those that flourish grow increasingly vain; 榮者日益驕，  
Those that decline grow increasingly humble. 衰者日益喪。  
If the heart is imprisoned by the form; 以心為形役，  
A flash of ideas generates myriad delusions. 一念幻諸妄。 10  
I was born in a time of peace and prosperity; 文安予始生，  
To a family with a pure and good name. 清白貽賢望。  
At thirteen I learned the *Odes* and the *Rites*; 十三學詩禮，  
At fifteen I learned to mix wine and sauce. 十五調酒醬。  
At twenty I was married; 二十賦於歸, 15  
And served my parents-in-law with discretion. 翁姑謹奉養。  
At the time my husband was young; 夫子正少年，  
He was free and unconstrained in spirit. 襟懷頗跌宕。  
We shared a lamp reading books; 讀書分燈火，  
Opening my toilet case, we discussed eyebrow styles. 啟奩商眉樣。 20  
“Fish in water” can hardly compare with us; 魚水差堪比，  
And how can we pale beside the pair of phoenixes? 鸞鳳遑多讓。  
Our marriage aroused great admiration from other people; 旁人艷羨生，  
“What a fine couple they are!” 嘉淑彼儷伉。  
How would I know that the Principle of the Creator; 安知造化理, 25

Is to distribute joy and worry in turns. 歡憂互相降。  
 At dawn I was as frozen as if I'd tread on ice; 朝寒若履冰，  
 At dusk I was burning hot as if in a fiery oven. 暮熱陷火炕。  
 Ghosts gathered around my medicine jars; 鬼氣聚藥爐，  
 At night they walked along my bed curtains. 宵行緣綃帳。 30  
 Trying to speak, I couldn't find my voice; 欲言不出聲，  
 And only gasped in my throat. 格格喉嚨藏。  
 My heart was broken and my tears dried up; 腸斷眼淚枯，  
 My breath constricted, and my mind and soul lost from my control. 氣噤  
 神魂忘。  
 Our affections were lost within a second; 恩愛捐須臾， 35  
 How dare I ever expect to be well again. 敢期復無恙。  
 Numinous breeze swirled across the ground; 靈風卷地來，  
 The temple banners were just like those of the gods. 幡幢儼仙仗。  
 Her willow twig sprinkled sweet dew; 楊枝灑甘露，  
 In my trance I felt the compassionate clouds arising. 恍惚慈雲颺。 40  
 Gradually I felt my limbs get lighter; 漸覺四體輕，  
 Fog peeled away from my eyes and ears. 耳目披煙瘴。  
 I turned to look at the one at bedside; 回顧繞床人，  
 And did not believe that I was still alive. 不信猶生向。  
 In my weakness I saw my husband; 憔悴見兒夫， 45  
 And turned so sad in my heart. 中心轉怏怏。  
 He described to me how ill I had been; 為述病時態，  
 And our sorrow and joy were immeasurable. 悲喜交難量。  
 Thus I felt a little better; 由此得稍蘇，  
 And my lungs also cleared. 清虛辟肺臟。 50  
 Against the beams of the setting sun, the window shades rolled half way  
 down;  
 晚晴簾半垂，  
 I was thankful to have some light food. 粥茗勞饋饗。  
 Happening to pick up books on the desk; 偶檢案頭書，  
 I find my old books untouched, looking as if new. 舊本若新況。  
 In delight I searched quickly in them, ideas sparkling in my mind; 妙緒悅  
 妍搜， 55  
 Without seeking help all my doubts were cleared. 群疑絕依傍。  
 Leaning on my pillows, I felt at ease and at leisure; 欹枕意舒閑，  
 All of a sudden, I was alarmed by sounds of weeping. 驚啼忽淒愴。  
 I urged the person to come close; 促令近至前，  
 And intensely enquired about her misery many times. 切切重諮訪。 60  
 The old woman told me, "My husband worked so hard; 嫗謂夫勞苦，  
 And was suddenly stricken with wind and chill. 驟病風寒釀。

Now he's been bedridden for two months; 臥床幾六旬，  
 How could I pay off the debts? 負債將安償。  
 If my life has already come to this; 生也已如此， 65  
 Indeed how could death be worse?" 死矣誠何妨。  
 Hearing this I gave a deep sigh; 聞言長太息，  
 This old woman is really stupid! 老嫗殊愚蠢。  
 Poverty is not a burden; 衰貧未為憂，  
 And what is there about wealth to hail? 顯榮奚足尚。 70  
 Heaven and the earth do not harbor selfish ends; 天地總無私，  
 People should embrace their fate according to appropriate rites. 隨遇禮斯  
 當。  
 To experience few separations in life: 人生寡別離，  
 Can there be any greater joy than this? 至樂安有兩。  
 With white hair the couple still stay together; 白髮仍相偕， 75  
 Finding pleasure in even the simplest life. 簞瓢愜俛仰。  
 True indeed is *Equality of Things*; 達哉《齊物論》，  
 It really has not misled me! 真不我欺誑。  
 I sorted out the hairpins that I wore at my wedding; 理我嫁時釵，  
 Gave them to the old woman, asking her not to be distressed. 持贈勿惆  
 悵。 80  
 As the sun sets deeper down; 去去夕陽沈，  
 I closed my bed curtains to seek dreams in sleep. 尋夢圍屏幃。  
 Where were the sounds of the flower peddler coming from? 何處賣花聲，  
 A cool breeze arose in the ancient alleys. 涼風生古巷。 84  
 (SYLSG, 1.7b-9a.)