Transforming Gender and Emotion

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CHAPTER 3

Between Women and Men

Friendship vs. Love

In the Liang-Zhu story, the problem of gender becomes most noticeable as Zhu Yingtai builds her relationship with Liang Shanbo at the academy. Zhu’s male persona during their period of studying together (tongchuang 同窓) forms the kernel of her friendship with Liang but is also fundamentally in conflict with her true gender and emotions. Despite her initial intentions, Zhu ultimately spends as much time and energy experimenting with her contradictory gender roles as she does on her pursuit of academic fulfillment. Gender continues to play an important role in the love relationship that later develops between Liang and Zhu, and in their tragic deaths.

Looking back at the history of Liang-Zhu, we can see that studying together was already a major theme of the story during the Song dynasty, as was Zhu’s burial with Liang. Through the theme of studying together, the story had long explored the depth of the relationships young people develop when they leave home and how passionately they maintain those relationships (see chapter 1), a theme that was common in the dramatic versions of Liang-Zhu with titles such as “Tongchuang jì” 同窗記 (Records of a Common Career in Study) that appeared during the Ming and Qing periods. As friends, Liang and Zhu develop a mutual affection built on their common interests and activities while living (tongju 同居) and studying together (tongxue 同學) at the academy. Their friendship is based not only on utility and pleasure, but also on virtue, which resonates with the perfect model of friendship suggested by Aristotle. The theme of studying together in Liang-Zhu is constructed to exemplify the strong bond between friends, particularly school-aged youths, in traditional Chinese society. At first glance, the relationship established while
studying together seems similar to friendship in a modern sense, focusing as it does on deliberate choice and reciprocal behavior within, for the most part, private life. The meaning of friendship between schoolmates in pre-modern Chinese society, however, was much broader and deeper: it was initially a means to cultivate and perfect one’s morality, but it also played a critical role in forming a social and public community among men, in which intimate connections of talent, action, emotion, and desire were a requirement of membership. For school-aged youths, the drive to succeed academically could easily form a barrier to friendship, and in this highly competitive school environment that invited amity and enmity, one’s character—a constellation of gender, desire, emotion, and ideals—was strenuously tested against those of one’s peers. Under these conditions friends strove for a better, mutually beneficial form of companionship that could become almost cultishly close. More often than not, such friendship blurred the precise emotional boundaries between love (eros) and friendship (philia), which converged to constitute a particularly strong friendship bond. In Liang-Zhu, the emotional depth of the protagonists’ friendship intensifies over time, from their first encounter on the road to the academy through their moment of parting, and also evolves from a friendship from one of utility and pleasure into one of virtue, and, finally, into a life-and-death friendship (shengsi zhi jiao 生死之交).

The friendship between Liang and Zhu at school is also a manifestation of Zhu’s ability to control her emotions and sexuality. Within the exclusively male environment of the academy, Zhu temporarily annihilates gender disparity by convincingly donning the garb of a male student. Zhu’s complicated feelings toward Liang are suppressed so that she does not violate a double boundary: that of friendship on one hand, and of her virginity on the other. This means that she lives daily with the inherent risks and limitations of her performance as a male student. Suspicions around Zhu’s identity inevitably arise, and she plays a risky game by repeatedly assuaging Liang’s doubts. But these moments also raise questions: How does Zhu manage to escape Liang’s suspicion, or perhaps, why is Liang willfully blind to any suspicions? How is it possible that Zhu’s deception is not exposed while she is actually living with Liang? And what does her success in this gender performance represent with respect to the Liang-Zhu story and its cultural meaning? A careful analysis of the nature and scope of the relationship between Liang and Zhu during their time at the academy reveals nuanced representations of gender that provide insight
into their relationship while locating it within the larger discourse of masculinity and femininity in China.

The progression of the Liang-Zhu relationship from friends to lovers, developed primarily through episodes arising from their cohabitation, reflects the tastes of the audience with respect to gender relations. The action represents gender-crossing as exciting and fun and uses Zhu’s gender play to reveal her intelligence. Zhu’s ongoing attempts to assuage suspicions about her gender are both suspenseful and humorous, while also revealing much about the ideals of Liang and Zhu. The knowledge of Zhu’s true sex and gender makes this phase of the story exhilarating for the reader. The enjoyment Liang and Zhu find in getting to know each other and working together tempers the anxiety created by the possibility of Zhu’s identity surfacing. Even when the ongoing game over gender distinction is over, there remains a distinct notion of precisely defined gender.

The stubborn persistence of the gender-boundary that restrains the two characters ultimately leads the story to its tragic culmination. It is the internal characteristics of both Liang and Zhu that delay Liang’s discovery of Zhu’s true gender and prevent his realizing his love for her until it is too late. The tragic deaths of the protagonists, allowing them to be united forever in the afterlife, suggest that audiences initially favored a tragic ending, even while they actively enjoy the story of Liang and Zhu’s time together. Why would the audience want the lovers to die [and, in later versions, return]? I suggest that the tragic ending of Liang-Zhu is presaged by the strength with which gender distinctions and norms are maintained while they study together. The rigidly defined gender designations that Liang and Zhu embody at the academy are meant to guide them toward compliance with social norms.

These norms do not, however, prevent the audience from supporting the characters’ relationship; the audience’s real feelings cannot be dictated by the norms represented in the story, and the tension between normative and popular values adds to the tale’s excitement. Ironically, though, the audience sees death and a shared tomb as the only possibility for continued growth in Zhu and Liang’s romance. Given that social norms sharply defined male and female character ideals and acceptable male-female relationships, there is no rational, moral way to save both their relationship and their lives. The faceless audiences of Liang-Zhu demanded that the characters they loved be transported into a new space that was void of the social restrictions imposed on them in life. In light of the social protocols that determine their inescapable fates, Liang and Zhu’s adherence to traditional ideals may be viewed as the determining factor in their tragedy.
Liang embodies two archetypal views of Chinese masculinity: the *junzi* (gentleman) and the *caizi* (talented scholar). These two archetypes, which were dominant in romance drama and fiction during the Qing period, also appear in various combinations in the construction of Zhu's male character and in each version of Liang-Zhu, particularly the elongated prosimetric version. These models of manhood underlie the narrative mechanism across different versions, so that the finales of disparate Liang-Zhu tales are interconnected across a wide spectrum of interpretations. Liang and Zhu's responses to each other, regardless of differences in gender and emotion, create a versatile template for any desired or actual human relationship.

**Becoming a Boy:**
The Brotherhood Oath and Male Bonding

“Boy meets girl” is an enduring narrative theme across cultures and time periods. Based on the perception that complicated, worldly values interfere little in their interactions, the meeting of young people is often described as a pure, naive model of human relationship. Liang and Zhu’s first encounter foretells the innocence of their relationship. The two students do not arrive at their meeting place simultaneously. Although a few treatments differ, it is common in the ballad versions that Zhu arrives first. In “Liang Zhu shan’ge,” for example, Zhu travels to the academy with her maid Renxin 人心 (or Yinxin 殷心), who is dressed as a male servant. They stop to rest at a pavilion under a willow tree, where they are soon joined by Liang and his servant Shijiu 事久 (or Sijiu 四九):

The weather of the third lunar month brings life to everything;
Her dress is thoroughly soaked with her fragrant sweat.
Tying up a horse under the shade of a willow tree,
Yingtai has a rest and enjoys the cool breeze.
One other young scholar arrives at the pavilion.
Shanbo urges his horse and passes by the pavilion;
Sijiu follows him closely, carrying a book case on his shoulder.
Shanbo stops his horse under the same willow tree;
He sees a student sitting in the pavilion
Whom [he] greets formally even before he rests.
Shanbo issues a formal greeting and asks, standing to the side of the road:
“My benevolent friend, where do you live?
How old are you?
Why are you traveling to other places?
What is your respectful name and rank [in your family]?”

三月天气抛回阳，一阵香汗湿衣裳．柳荫树下拴了马，英台歇足乘风凉．长亭又到秀才郎．山伯策马过长亭，四九挑箱紧随跟．柳荫树下停住马，亭中坐着一书生，未曾歇定把礼行．山伯施礼站路旁，“仁兄家住啥地方？贵庚今年多少岁？有何贵干走他乡？尊姓大名怎排行？”

In this passage, as in most Liang-Zhu versions, Liang Shanbo initiates this first exchange of greetings. Not only has Zhu, as a girl, been raised not to talk to men, but her passive behavior also reflects her intent to act carefully, so she won’t accidentally expose her true identity. Liang asks questions that might seem awkward, or even rude, to readers from a different culture and time period, but they are traditional in China. A stranger’s age and home region were important clues to how he should be treated. This common scene demonstrates the influence of the Chinese social hierarchy over simple acts like forming a friendship.

In most Liang-Zhu versions, Zhu’s responses to Liang’s questions quickly lead to the two becoming sworn brothers. There are many explanations for this rapid intimacy, but in most versions from the Ming and Qing periods, it is simply that their basic social roles are similar enough to bring them together. From Zhu’s answers, Liang finds out that they come from neighboring hometowns, are the same age, and share a common goal, all of which creates a favorable impression. Other versions emphasize their appealing physical appearances as well. A modern dramatic version provides a more vivid and elaborate description of the scene, with a direct expression of their initial feelings about each other:

shanbo [speaks, aside]: In my view, Yingtai is young and handsome. Our talk accords with each other, and we come from neighboring districts. I would like to be his sworn brother, but I don’t know if he will agree. . . .
shanbo [speaks]: I’d like to become your sworn brother, but I don’t know if you’ll agree.
yingtai [speaks, after contemplation]: What you have said, my friend, is exactly what I am thinking. This is our first time to
be away from home and live among strange people and in unfamiliar places. So it would be good to become sworn brothers and help each other. But first we must determine which of us would be the elder and the younger. . . .

ZHU AND LIANG [SING TOGETHER]:
What a great meeting!
Under the willow’s shade we bow together. . . .
This oath of sworn brotherhood makes our relationship excel that of blood brothers,
We shall remain true friends in life and death.

Liang’s remarks on Zhu’s appearance show that Liang likes Zhu because, at first sight, her looks are pleasant to him. His next reason is the practical advantage of friendship: mutual caring. The scene presents the mutual benefit of having an ally in their new environment as a sound reason for swearing brotherhood. Liang and Zhu’s recognition of the utility of friendship when far from home highlights the practical need and justification for social bonding in premodern China. This instantiates the very case Aristotle presents of the first two models of friendship—friendship of pleasure and friendship of utility—which he categorizes as incidental ones. Whether the other person is attractive and useful is a common consideration in building such friendships. Once two individuals agree on their mutual attractiveness and usefulness, their friendship can proceed. In Liang-Zhu, they call each other “brothers”; in this version, their ages are presented as different (Zhu is sixteen and Liang seventeen) so as to allow Zhu to assume the role of younger brother and Liang that of elder brother. A ritual follows: a broken willow twig serves as incense; they bow to Heaven and swear to brotherhood in life and death. The same version also features a hilarious meeting of Liang and Zhu’s servants. In this first encounter at the pavilion, neither Liang nor Zhu initially dares speak to the other, so Sijiu and Renxin play go-between
with their casual talk. Sijiu, realizing that Liang and Zhu have made a good impression on each other, asks Renxin about Zhu and proposes the pledging of sworn brotherhood for its mutual benefits. Prompted by Sijiu, who has already obtained a great deal of information about Zhu, Liang plucks up the courage to suggest the oath to Zhu.

In both the “Liang Zhu shan’ge” and “Liu yin ji” (chuanju) versions, Liang is the first to propose brotherhood, but in some versions it is Zhu who takes the initiative. In “Quanshi,” Zhu—surprisingly for a girl from the gentry who has left home for the first time—knows how to treat a boy and how to make friends. Her prompt action and persuasive remarks fascinate Liang. In this version, Zhu initiates their discussion of brotherhood, saying:

“No now I see that you and I are headed in the same direction.
It is said that if there is a karmic affinity, people a thousand li apart will meet, and if there is no karmic affinity, people will not see each other even if they are face to face.
If you are willing to bring me,
I’d like to be your sworn brother and go to the city of Hangzhou together.”

Zhu plays a leading role in building a sworn brotherhood, and her use of the proverb about karmic affinity adds meaning to the encounter. She uses her conversational knowledge to hide her true identity and protect herself.

Liang and Zhu’s relationship, while solely based on mutual interest and the will to fulfill brotherhood, remains immature and thus lacking in deep physical and emotional interactions. According to C. S. Lewis, the interests and background shared by individuals constitute a sort of companionship. In the strict sense, the companions are not yet friends, and this companionship is “only the matrix of friendship”; friendship supervenes. Individuals, therefore, remain companions until they share something more than common interests, “something more inward, less widely shared and less easily defined, etc.” In Lewis’s terms, Liang and Zhu present a perfect model of companions, but not yet friends, even though they have sworn the brotherhood oath. They will gradually become friends through a shared vision and feelings, and particularly through their determination to care for each other
for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, because Liang and Zhu are both bound by their oath, the romantic relationship between them is forestalled.

Detailed descriptions of everyday life at the academy show how the companionship between Liang and Zhu develops into a strong friendship. At the academy, Liang and Zhu share all activities as sworn brothers, even sharing a bed. Their common life at the academy is exemplified in the depiction of their studying together. They both work hard and achieve the highest level of performance. None of the Liang-Zhu versions, in China or Korea, fails to emphasize the couple's dedication to their studies:

Time passes by like an arrow, rushing people into senility;
Years elapse like a loom, pressing youth.
Spring, summer, and autumn come and then go,
Suddenly winter comes, and the plum blossoms are fragrant.
Sharing a desk, Liang and Zhu learn words and passages together;
Determined, they study diligently every day.
One year has passed after beginning their studies in the academy;
Yingtai's intelligence is indeed extraordinary.
Having perused the *Nine Classics* and the *Three Tactics*,
Yingtai ranks as the top student of the academy.
When Shanbo writes one sentence,
Yingtai is able to complete two or three.

Within a year, Liang and Zhu have mastered many classic texts. It is interesting to note that, in the above “Jieyi gongshu” version, it is Zhu’s outstanding talent in learning that is emphasized. Although she knows her studies will not lead to an official career, she pursues her education for her own fulfillment. Zhu’s academic achievement surpasses even Liang’s, and she wins first place among the three thousand students at the academy. Her hard work and academic excellence are described in glowing terms:

Yingtai reads late till midnight;
She has mastered the *Nine Classics* and the *Three Tactics*;
She has become very skillful in the composition of poetry and rhapsody.
No one among the three thousand can compete with her;
Having her mind filled with writings, she becomes perspicacious and virtuous.

英台深夜读文章，九经三略来通晓，题诗作赋甚高强，三千学生应难比，文章满腹作贤良. 19

Looking back on Zhu’s sighing over her embroidery in the inner chambers, and her motives for study then, we can see that she has fulfilled the goals she set back in her lonely, secluded room. This emphasis on Zhu’s academic performance demonstrates a thread of advocacy for women’s education and for the benefits of the intellectual exchange between men and women. There is no implication in this “Jieyi gongshu” version of any betrayal, anger, or jealousy between Liang and Zhu due to their intense competition at the academy. Instead, their studying together brings synergy to their close bond. Just as they pledged under the willow tree, the two watch over each other and ensure that their academic success is mutual. This protectiveness also appears in many other situations.

The version “Yingtai hen” 英台恨 (Yingtai’s Grief) 20 perhaps best describes Liang and Zhu’s concern for each other during their schooling. In this version, they study at a small, local academy and take good care of each other in their daily routine:

Each day they collect firewood once;
In turn, they carry water to refill the vat.
But Yingtai is frail, and
Shanbo always shoulders water in her stead.

一天一次把柴抱，轮著担水把缸添．内有英台气力小，山伯遭遭替她担．21

This scene demonstrates that, disguised as a man, Zhu faces hard labor at the academy. However the focus is not on Zhu’s physical weakness but on Liang’s touching insistence on helping her. While it may be quite ordinary for friends to help each other, in this case the help takes on a special meaning to both Zhu and the audience, who know how help in desperate moments
builds trust and attachment. As implied by the title, “Yingtai’s Grief,” in this version it is through Zhu’s unhappy moments that the relationship of Liang-Zhu develops and fully blooms. The difficult situations Zhu faces reveal Liang Shanbo as a strong, active man. By turning his physical strength to her assistance, he emerges as more than just a friend to Zhu. Liang is also portrayed as valuing friendship over study, not hesitating to expend his energy in helping. Zhu’s affection for Liang is based not on admiration for his academic accomplishments, which are less impressive than her own, but on his excellent character. This rendering of Liang Shanbo reflects the image of him discussed in chapter 1: that of a humble, sincere, and good-hearted youth. Liang reveals his feelings about Zhu not through complex reflections but through simple, everyday actions.

A related episode in the same version gives another hint about Liang’s feelings for Zhu and how their relationship develops into something more than friendship. One winter day, Zhu is told to carry water by a teacher’s wife who is suspicious about her identity. When she cannot finish the task by herself, she silently calls to Liang, thinking:

“Brother Liang,
Please come quickly!
Please quickly come!
Help your younger brother carry the water!”

Liang, studying alone in a room beyond the reach of Zhu’s voice, suddenly thinks of her:

At this time, Yingtai is thinking about her old friend.
Let us talk about Shanbo from the Liang family:
“My worthy younger brother has gone to fetch water today,
But he has not returned yet.
Indeed I know that he is frail.
But still,
Let me go to the well and check.”
Shanbo puts down his *Four Books*;
Striding to the well as fast as he can.
Their relationship has, by this point, achieved a deeper mental and spiritual connection than mere friendship. Reciprocity is portrayed as the essence of an ideal relationship,24 and the mutual trust and emotional bond that have grown between them now allow them to sense each other’s distress from a distance. Liang often acts as a guardian angel to Zhu. This telepathic communication may be viewed as the ideal state that any close relationship strives to reach, and it is also used to solidify their companionship.

The close relationship between Liang and Zhu is also evidenced in the way they address each other. After pledging an oath of sworn brotherhood, they routinely call each other elder (xiong 兄) or younger (di 弟) brother. On one special occasion, they define their relationship using literary tropes referring to friendship. Liang refers to Zhu as zhiyin 知音, the well-known expression for “true friend,”25 when he visits her: for example, he says, “I have come to look for my true friend (找知音)”26 or “I accidentally met my true friend before (遇知音).”27 In the “Jieyi gonghu” version from the Ming dynasty, Zhu expresses her perception of her relationship with Liang in a parting poem:

Remembering that past scholars followed the traditional way,
I encountered you on the way, studying together with you.
Now when we return, the plum blossoms on the northern hill have just turned white;
When we first arrived, the blooming flowers in the south were crimson.
Separation comes after three beautiful springs;
After a delightful night, each goes in a different direction.
When will we meet again like Fan Shi and Zhang Shao?
I have gathered new poems as the gift for your departure.

忆昔先贤秋古风，共君同学道相逢．来归岭北梅初白，去日江南花正红．美景三春分聚散，良宵一宿各西东．范张难约何时会，聊集新诗别赠君．28
As she recalls the years they have spent together as friends, in harmony with the natural passage of time, Zhu unveils the feelings she has developed for Liang. In the last two lines of the poem, Zhu compares her relationship with Liang to that of Fan Shi and Zhang Shao, the famous model of Chinese male friendship, known as the “friendship of metal and stone” (jinshi zhi jiao 金石之交). She hopes that, like Fan Shi and Zhang Shao, she and Liang will be reunited someday.

A closer examination of the story of Fan Shi and Zhang Shao gives us further insight into how Zhu feels about her friendship with Liang. The Fan-Zhang story has much in common with Liang-Zhu, such as the theme of studying together, the promise of reunion, and, finally, death. The relationship between Fan and Zhang provides a clear model for Zhu’s vision of male friendship. According to the earlier version of the story in Soushen ji (The Record of Searching for the Supernatural, fourth century CE), Fan Shi (style name Juqing 巨卿) and Zhang Shao (style name Yuanbo 元伯) are classmates at the Imperial Academy (太学) during the Han dynasty, and they pledge brotherhood and become best friends. After completing their course of study, they set a date for a reunion at Zhang’s home. On the appointed day, Fan sets out as promised. On the way, he dreams of receiving news of Zhang’s unexpected death. He rushes to Zhang’s house, and although he is too late for the funeral, Zhang’s coffin remains unmoved until Fan arrives.

This story reemerged in late imperial China, along with a revived taste for the intimidating intensity of Fan and Zhang’s friendship. In Feng Menglong’s expanded version of the Fan-Zhang story in Yushi mingyan, Fan and Zhang value their friendship even above their own lives. Knowing that ghosts are believed to be able to travel one thousand li in a single day, Fan commits suicide for fear of being late for his appointment with Zhang. After their meeting, Zhang realizes that it was as a ghost that Fan had visited him, and he goes to Fan’s home to hold a funeral for him. Afterward he himself commits suicide by slitting his throat so that he can be with Fan forever, as a testament to the true friendship (wenjingzhijiaow 刎頸之交) between them. With this twisted and intensified plot, Feng’s version uses the friends’ mutual death to signify the sincerity of their friendship, suggesting that it must be maintained even beyond the grave. In the “Jieyi gongshu” version of Liang-Zhu, Zhu’s allusion to the Fan-Zhang story thus demonstrates her wish and determination that the affection she and Liang share will continue beyond their deaths. The reference to the Fan-Zhang story in the “Jieyi gongshu” version also suggests that Liang-Zhu’s theme of friendship was
embellished and strengthened by other folktales, vernacular novels, and dra-
mas on friendship, and particularly by Feng’s version of the Fan-Zhang story written around the seventeenth century.

In traditional China, particularly in orthodox Confucianism, friendship, rooted in selective and individual values, inevitably conflicted with familial and societal values. In a society that was based on hierarchy and that empha-
sized the collective over the individual, friendship—with its perceived vul-
nerability to selfishness—was not highly valued. Norman Kutcher’s study on friendship in the context of Confucianism demonstrates how cautiously Confucian writers responded to the nonhierarchical and voluntary quality of friendship. Those writers attempted to lessen the importance of friend-
ship and mitigate its perceived detrimental effects on hierarchy by defining it narrowly, as a bond that could help in fulfilling one’s responsibilities to family and society, and in achieving moral perfection and Confucian study. This emphasis on the utility of friendship allowed it to coexist with order in family and state, specifically as an analogy to the three most basic relation-
ships: the ruler-subject relationship, the parent-child relationship, and the husband-wife relationship. For example, an elder friend should take care of a younger friend just as a ruler or teacher takes care of a subject or student. Friends should also be complementary, like husband and wife. The analogy to the husband-and-wife relationship also theoretically permits the growth of an erotic sensibility within friendship, and of social tolerance toward it.

Scholars such as Susan Mann have demonstrated the predominance of the male bond in almost every aspect of China’s patriarchal society, and have called for more attention to male bonds and relations in Chinese history. Despite the philosophical caution against friendship, in reality it is inargu-
able that (male) friendship has served as a framework for social activity in China. Friendship for advantage, where social connections would serve as a networking ground vital to success, was particularly encouraged during the schooling period. In late imperial China, particularly during the late Ming period, friendship had great textual visibility; the male bond, both homoso-
cial and homosexual, was viewed not merely as an aid to career success but as an outlet for moral, emotional, intellectual, sexual, and artistic demands. According to Joseph McDermott, Matteo Ricci’s translation of classical Greek and Latin thoughts on friendship (Jiaoyou lun 交友論) is said to have contributed to the increased discourse on friendship among Chinese intel-
lectuals of that period, but late Ming intellectuals’ flexible understanding of its meaning and emphasis on its value in reinforcing morality also played an important role in the social practice of friendship. Along with Kutcher’s
discussion of the pitfalls inherent in the concept of friendship and the Confucian literati’s efforts to overcome them, McDermott’s study illuminates the increased practice and recognition of friendship that engendered the need to make logical sense of it within the textual realm.

Friendship proved useful in achieving social ends, and the desire to form a homosocial community sometimes led Chinese men to abandon the values that defined their other relationships. This emphasis on social value partly explains why male friendships took priority over male-female relationships among Chinese literati. Anthropologist Lionel Tiger suggests that male bonding, which can be seen as preadaptive, was developed by male cooperative behavior during the evolution of the division of labor, particularly hunting and warfare. In this view, a strong sense of male bonding, based on dependence or particular trust between males, was forged during cooperation between men, and it influenced the social view of male-female bonding or (heterosexual) marriage as a relationship mainly for reproduction, which can be rendered as either inferior or threatening to male bonding. In practice, however, homosexual behavior is seen as not incompatible with traditional marriage in China, which concerned one’s obligations to continue the family line more than any other personal interests. Geng Song’s study of Chinese male culture shows that a misogynist attitude and condemnation of heterosexuality are central to the homosocial/homosexual discourse in patriarchal Chinese society. Research on male bonding during the Ming and Qing dynasties has revealed a strong undercurrent of heterosexual norms being ignored or resisted. The development of the bond between Liang and Zhu—an essential part of the Liang-Zhu story—cannot reasonably be scrutinized separately from the fashion of celebrating male friendship. Zhu’s willful infiltration of the male community, which seems to undermine the exclusivity of the male relationship by addressing the marginalization of equivalent relationships among women, in fact plays an active role in echoing, solidifying, and reinforcing the male-centered relationship codes promoted by the Confucian order.

Not a Girl: Killing Suspicions and Oppressing Heterosexuality

Zhu’s ongoing efforts to disarm Liang’s suspicions about her identity are another key element of Liang and Zhu’s co-residence at the academy. While
scenes of her studying with fellow students are certainly necessary to the narrative, how she manages to conceal her identity is of utmost importance to the reader—and to her status as a student. It is assumed that everyone aside from Liang Shanbo already has their suspicions about Zhu’s identity, particularly the master and his wife, who at times exert their authority to assist Zhu in her deception. Liang Shanbo is in a very complex position. The brotherhood oath makes Zhu feel that Liang is a friend who will always be on her side. Liang’s presence alleviates her fear of living with unknown youths, but Zhu still needs to assure Liang of her fake identity.

In the earlier official narration (see chapter 1), Liang is described as a man of simplicity and innocence because he doesn’t realize that Zhu is a girl. Because this image of Liang was seen as too naive and unrealistic, attempts emerged in popular storytelling to portray him as more perceptive, which altered and challenged Liang’s basic image. Liang is described as a person with common sense, so it is only natural that he should sometimes question Zhu’s identity. In some versions, both Chinese and Korean, Liang is even aware of Zhu’s true sex soon after they meet. These changes in Liang’s character give each Liang-Zhu version room to develop a more dynamic Liang and an opportunity for additional dramatic episodes. Nevertheless, the Liang who, despite his doubts, shows absolute trust in Zhu remains dominant in popular storytelling, leaving un tarnished the Liang of earlier official narration.

The tension surrounding Zhu’s gender identity is manifested in Liang and Zhu’s dialogues, whether initiated by Liang or by Zhu. Depending on the version, Liang’s suspicion is first aroused either when the pair cross the river together or during the first night they sleep together at the inn or at the academy. In the following “Shuangxian baojuan” version, Zhu defends herself in advance, realizing that Liang may wonder why she doesn’t undress for bed:

The sun is already sinking in the west;  
They find an inn [where they can] stay.  
When they go into the room after finishing their dinner,  
Yingtai skillfully explains herself.  
“Brother Liang, I have been very sick since childhood, so I can’t take off my clothes when sleeping.”  
Shanbo answered, “My dear brother, since you are sick, don’t take them off!”
Zhu’s excuse is credible enough to convince Liang. From this moment on, Zhu’s game of providing plausible excuses continues. Once they start living in the academy, Liang’s questions become more frequent. His unwavering belief in Zhu’s words continues as long as Zhu performs a male identity. Of course, there comes a moment when Zhu’s body is exposed, and her explanations are not quite convincing. Yet they are conceivable enough that, in the end, Liang’s attitude remains the same. The following scene shows this moment unfolding:

It is during the heat of the sixth lunar month
That Yingtai opens her gown in the room.
How could she know that Shanbo enters and glimpses
Her snow-white skin and exposed breasts?
He comes forward and asks immediately,
“Why does your breast look like the mountains?”
Yingtai immediately answers,
Calling him her sworn brother,
“A man with a big breast shall become a minister,
As is clearly explained in the physiognomy.”
[Thus] deceived by Yingtai,
How could Shanbo possibly know Zhu is a girl?

Instead of pretending he hasn’t seen Zhu’s bared breast, Liang immediately questions her, and she promptly responds with improvised excuses. Despite the clear evidence, Liang is fooled. Zhu’s use of pseudoscientific language lends her words a certain authority and credibility. This echoes the earlier scene when, dressed as a fortune-teller, Zhu persuaded her father to permit
her to carry out her plan to study. Like her father, Liang comes to believe in Zhu’s words. Zhu also cleverly reminds Liang of the fact that they are sworn brothers, with its implication that Liang must be on Zhu’s side. The narration then implies that Liang doesn’t realize the truth not because he is naive but because he has unfailing faith in what Zhu says.

In this “Shuangxian baojuan” version, the scenario then develops further. Again, Liang finds something unusual about Zhu’s behavior, and again, Zhu provides her excuses. But this time, the question of whether or not to believe Zhu is premised on their particular relationship (or emotional connection) rather than on any logical explanation. What Liang is supposed to believe prevails over what he actually sees. When Zhu exposes her bare breast, she uses quick words to protect her identity. However, her explanation immediately makes Liang suspicious again. He begins to give more thought to previous situations that raised doubts about Zhu’s identity; the first example that comes to his mind is that, unlike the other students, Zhu urinates squatting down. At this moment Liang seems confident that Zhu is a girl, and he asks her to tell him the truth, promising to keep her secret. To the reader, this might seem like the appropriate moment for Zhu to tell the truth to Liang, the one person she can trust. She might even be better off if he knew her true identity.

However, Zhu sticks to the same tactics she has used before and again makes a pseudoscientific excuse. This time, though, it is even less convincing. Perhaps realizing that she sounds absurd, she plays the card of sworn brotherhood:

My dear brother, there’s something you don’t know. Do you remember the ancient people’s saying that “One should not urinate in front of the Sun, the Moon, and the stars”? If so, that would offend them, so one can’t enjoy longevity and immortality. How could you possibly not know about this, and come to ask me instead? Since we are sworn bothers, don’t listen to deviant words, which will only raise many suspicions. How can this not be gossiped about by others? It is more important to study together with you when being away from home.

Upon hearing these words, Shanbo becomes dumbfounded, He dares not raise the issue again.
According to the *tanci* version “Xinbian jin hudie zhuan,” which has much in common with the above “Shuangxian baojuan” in expressions, episodes, and sequence, Zhu’s justification for her way of urinating is drawn from the moral treatise called *Ganying pian* (Treatise of Feeling and Responding). Her improvised excuse, far-fetched as it may seem, therefore demonstrates her intelligence and talent for rhetoric. Seeing that her male disguise is endangered, in “Yingtai ge” (Song of Yingtai) Zhu uses the rhetoric of *junzi* to turn the situation in her favor: “To squat and pee suits the *junzi* (the noble man or gentleman). / To stand and pee is how a dog does it” (坐到小便是君子，站着小便狗撒尿). It is not clear that Zhu’s excuses convince Liang, but they do seem to make him, in light of their friendship, decide not to press her, especially since Zhu reminds him that they pledged brotherhood on their way to the academy, and asks Liang to focus more on their original goal, their studies. In other words, Liang tolerates Zhu’s excuses—indeed, her lies—because his rejection of them would violate the public construction of their relationship as faithful friends, and he perhaps sees the utility of those excuses in protecting both Zhu’s image and his own. At any rate, for Liang to accept Zhu’s words without thinking about them further remains his best option, and Zhu’s use of their relationship to dispel Liang’s doubts turns out to be effective.

After Zhu’s straightforward request that Liang focus on his studies, Liang’s doubts about Zhu’s identity are either dispelled or silenced. But for Zhu the discussion also serves as a warning that her schoolmates are suspicious of her identity. Knowing that her deception could be exposed at any minute undoubtedly makes Zhu nervous. At the academy, Zhu uses all possible measures to maintain her cover. She even asks the master to intervene in situations that are unfavorable to her deception. And yet, there are limits; Zhu can defend herself to Liang, but not to the majority of students. Both the “Yingtai ge quanben” (The Complete Version of the Song of [Zhu] Yingtai) and “Xinbian jin hudie zhu” versions include a hunting competition, during which the students make fun of Zhu’s poor performance in hunting due to her physical weakness and lack of experi-
ence. They even say that Zhu looks like a girl. Although some versions of the story emphasize Zhu’s filial piety (wishing to take care of her parents) or her familial obedience (following her parents’ order to come back) as her reasons for leaving the academy and returning home, in the above versions and in many others, her fear about her identity being discovered is her primary motivation for leaving. In “Yingtai ge quanben,” Zhu’s deception is actually discovered by Yan Yuan (Yan Hui), the smartest known disciple of Confucius. In this version, because Yan Yuan has unmasked her, Zhu reviews her time at the academy and decides to go home.

There are slight differences in the details of the episodes in which Zhu’s identity is called into question, but in most Chinese versions of the story her deception is successful, at least in the eyes of Liang and her fellow students. Nonetheless, although Zhu excels at study, she is not as skilled at everyday routines and at spending time with the other boys. Put to the test, she proves to be less able to imitate male behavior than she expected. She can’t completely hide the female traits in her behavior, and her physical strength is much less than that of the average boy. In fact, Zhu doesn’t ever attempt to achieve extreme masculinity. The narrative clearly shows that she is not a woman who excels in all that men do. Instead, what Zhu persistently wants to acquire is a knowledge and understanding of literary studies.

The suspicion aroused by her persistently feminine looks and behavior means that Zhu feels constantly in danger, and she relies almost entirely on words to diffuse suspicion. Zhu shows knowledge and a good command of language in defending herself, and she proves, through the completion of her literary studies, that a well-raised gentry girl is capable of becoming a woman of letters. During her three years of schooling, both her character as a gentry girl and her virginity are preserved. Whenever she is in trouble, she counts on Liang, whom she can persuade to help her, not only because of their brotherhood oath but also because of Liang’s warm and sincere personality.

It is important to remember that Liang is described as a kindhearted and compassionate man, far from naive or stupid. Liang deals with Zhu’s lies and his own suspicions according to trust and emotion. He is judicious enough to choose his own position in dealing with the matter, and remains a moral man, never trespassing over the boundary Zhu has drawn. To him, investigating is less meaningful than obeying the wishes of his friend. As a result, Zhu’s successful gender performance, the very thing she wants to achieve, becomes the greatest obstacle to the friends developing a romantic relationship.
As I previously mentioned, the very fact of Zhu’s female sex places male bonding in a vulnerable position; Zhu and Liang’s friendship clandestinely harbors the seeds of romantic love. Although Zhu’s male friendship with Liang continues based on her male persona, it is implied that her feelings gradually change into love as she spends time with him. The “Yintai hen” version explicitly says that Liang’s sincere and susceptible personality makes Zhu “secretly feel an affection for Liang” (暗喜欢). In the “Jinzhuan ji” version, from the same region as “Yingtai hen,” Zhu says to herself: “When I go back to my home later, / We could tie a knot as we have a marital fate” (日后回到我家下，俺二人配就姻缘). Following this, the narrator says, “This is just her thought. / Yingtai has never uttered those words” (这是英台心里话，未曾讲出口外边).

This emotional development is different from the most frequently portrayed type of love between girls and boys, namely, “falling in love at first glance” (yijian zhongqing 一见钟情). Zhu’s attempt to create a relationship of both heterosexual love and male bonding therefore represents a different kind of love in Chinese culture, fostered by the discrepancy between her assumed male gender and her actual female sex. Zhu’s love for Liang is therefore not inimical to their male bonding. In fact it may deepen her attachment by adding the element of romance. Liang understands his feelings for Zhu, however, only in the context of friendship. To him, Zhu is his best male friend, although “he” has a somewhat feminine beauty and form. Having to part from “him” causes Liang enormous pain. He is deeply depressed and loses all desire to recite the classics (每日诗书无心看，心中闷闷失精神). Indeed, his heart is broken, as if “A sharp saw has cut apart two interlocked trees, / [Like a] solitary goose flying alone without its mate” (锯齿断开连理木，孤飞只雁不成双). Liang laments how lonely he feels, lying sleepless in his cold bed after Zhu has gone (两人同睡温和暖，如今自睡却如冰). But still his affection for Zhu is devoid of any connotations of heterosexual love, rooted as it is in Zhu’s assertion of her male gender during their time together. When Zhu tries to reveal her identity through figurative language before she parts from Liang, she is thwarted by Liang’s firm belief—or, more strictly speaking, his determination to believe—that Zhu is a man.

It is possible, however, that Liang views Zhu’s image in more flexible terms than we have been led to believe. When Liang urges Zhu to tell the truth, he could be exploring the possibility of having a romantic relationship with her—once she confesses that she is a girl—or, indeed, even without her confession, if it were not impossible for him to be interested in such a relationship with a male.
To Liang, Zhu’s continuing to hide her identity could mean that she
doesn’t want any relationship with him other than their sworn brotherhood.
This notion that Zhu is (or wants to be) a man is so deeply carved into his
mind that it is very difficult for him to even consider the possibility that she is
a young woman. This possibility would also explain why Liang doesn’t under-
stand Zhu’s allusions and riddles until he actually sees her in female attire, or
until she reads her poem to him that states directly that she is a girl.\(^6^4\)

The tension surrounding Zhu’s identity at the academy is among the
most exciting themes of Liang-Zhu and is portrayed with humor and wit.
Zhu’s clever verbal defenses of her assumed identity lend savor to the gen-
der play. Ironically, the fact that Zhu’s words, technically all lies, are, for
whatever reason, believable to Liang turns out to be an essential element
of their true friendship. When her identity is questioned, Zhu’s sexuality
is aroused but then immediately quelled by her aggressive defenses. Zhu’s
excuses become a comic thrill for the audience. The tension about Zhu’s
troubled gender is eased by this playfulness, particularly in her relationship
with Liang. Neither the author nor the audience of Liang-Zhu would want
to see Zhu become entirely a man. They are more interested in seeing how
she escapes difficult situations with a flash of wit. They enjoy exploring
how an inexperienced, virtuous woman can sleep in the same room with
a man at such a young age, how a smart woman can compete intellectu-
ally with men, and how she can develop a deep friendship with a man—a
friendship of equals.\(^6^5\) These motifs are central to Liang-Zhu’s enduring
acceptance and popularity.

**Friends to Lovers: Contested Gender**

**Ideals of Junzi and Caizi**

Whether and how Liang and Zhu will meet again and continue their rela-
tionship (in marriage) after leaving school is at the core of the latter part of
Liang-Zhu. Zhu returns home hoping she will meet Liang again. And Liang
does come to visit, but too late;\(^6^6\) Zhu’s parents have already arranged a mar-
riage for her with a man from the Ma family. Zhu and Liang both strive to
change the situation, but they cannot flout the authority of parents and soci-
ety. Although Liang and Zhu’s friendship was the most important relation-
ship in each of their lives during their time at the academy, back in the real
world the bonds of friendship do not hold up to familial and societal obliga-
tions. After he confirms with his own eyes that Zhu is a girl, Liang bitterly
regrets that he has arrived too late to offer a marriage proposal. To Zhu’s family, cancellation of the previous engagement would have been almost impossible; such an act would surely bring public shame. Soon after, Liang becomes ill and dies. Liang’s failure to marry Zhu not only indicates the institutional force of arranged marriage, but also illuminates traits of Liang’s character that are not always fleshed out in the earlier part of the story.

In this latter part of the story, Liang is portrayed as a vulnerable and frail young man who, finding no solution for his unsatisfied desire, surrenders his life. This fragile but love-oriented image of Liang reveals that Liang’s character has gradually been filled out as the story evolved, and that a gender shift has also taken place, to varying degrees depending on the version of the story. In this change we also see the existence of, and tension between, two conflicting ideals of masculinity—those of the junzi (gentleman) and the caizi (talented scholar). These two ideals play a large part in determining the nature of Liang and Zhu’s relationship and the various endings of the story.

The construction of Liang’s character within these two views of Chinese masculinity produce two different sets of male-female couples: the junzi and shunü 淑女 (fair or gentle maiden), and the caizi and jiaren 佳人 (beauty). The term shunü is drawn from a virtuous woman praised in the first poem of The Classic of Poetry, “Fishhawk” (關雎), in which a shunü is presented as an ideal match for a junzi, whereas the idea of the jiaren hails from caizi-jiaren (talented scholar and beauty) stories in the drama and fiction of Ming-Qing times. These two sets of models show how the characters of Liang and Zhu have historically represented different male and female ideals to different audiences, and also how those ideals determine the different endings of the story.

The term junzi (literally, “son of a ruler”) came, during the time of Confucius, to mean a superior man, a gentleman, or a cultivated man who sets a moral example to all, regardless of social status and gender. Anyone could become a junzi through cultivation; it was an ideal to strive for, a higher calling than its opposite, xiaoren 小人 (petty or inferior man). But in time junzi became almost exclusively associated with male discourse on integrated personality or on exemplary masculinity based on the Confucian ideology. Briefly speaking, the core of moral virtue for a junzi is ren 仁, which can be translated variously as care, love, humanness, benevolence, or true goodness. Along with xiao 孝 (filial piety) and li 禮 (ritual propriety), ren is a central idea of Confucian morality; a person of ren is expected to establish his own character and, in so doing, help establish the characters of others. This vir-
tue extends from oneself to one’s family, then to others, to others’ families, and, finally, to one’s country. Confucius explains how to attain ren in The Analects: “To subdue one’s self and return to propriety (li) is perfect virtue” (克己復禮). Ren is the outcome of the internalization and actualization of li, attained by self-restraint and self-discipline. A person of ren therefore serves others (為人) and the public welfare, rather than personal desires or private interests. A real gentleman, therefore, should not be overcome by sexual temptation, and this point became an important barometer by which to judge men’s qualifications as junzi.

Liang’s image as a junzi springs from his period at the academy, where he is very much a faithful scholar, official, and friend. Liang cultivates his junzi character legitimately through study. He fully observes the prescriptions in the Confucian classics and obeys the master’s words. But, in particular, Liang’s persistent avoidance of Zhu’s sexuality demonstrates that his character is suitable to the junzi ideal. Liang’s apparent lack of interest in female sexuality while he works to maintain his sworn brotherhood with Zhu shows that he suppresses his desire or controls his private concerns in order to adhere to the virtue of ren. Zhu Yingtai is able to use this virtue to help conceal her true gender; whenever she is about to be exposed, she cites The Analects or enlists the master’s authority. Liang’s sincere acceptance of everything Zhu tells him and his adherence to social regulations exemplify his junzi character. He scarcely attempts to cross either Zhu’s or society’s boundaries, even when it makes him seem foolish or, ultimately, leads him to sacrifice his life. He would certainly not be able to accept cohabitation with a female Zhu, so Zhu’s true gender must remain hidden in order to maintain their friendship and their brotherhood. If Liang Shanbo made any real effort to ascertain Zhu’s true sex, or if he pursued heterosexual—or homosexual—love with her, his character as a junzi would collapse.

This compelling image of Liang as a junzi expands his vaguely described character in early official accounts and complements Zhu’s complex character as a brave, gender-transgressing, and righteous woman. Zhu’s cultivation by, as, and for a junzi, at school with Liang, presupposes the refining or nurturing of her character as a shunü. In particular, Liang’s ignorance of sexual matters helps Zhu establish and maintain her image as a junzi/shunü, which protects her from censure for mixing with men at the academy. For example, in “Jieyi gongshu,” her admittedly unorthodox acts are viewed through the lens of the junzi/shunü ideal. When Liang visits Zhu at her home after she has left the academy, she confesses concern for social norms by saying, “If I
still violate the law, knowing it is illicit, / I would be sent to jail as a criminal” (奴奴知法來犯法, 將去牢中做罪人). “Originally I wanted to marry you,” she tells Liang. / “But at home my parents make the decisions” (本欲將身來嫁你，在家由父又由娘). Zhu’s acknowledgment of her parents’ authority in marriage decisions demonstrates that she has sublimated her own desire to the normative power to which male-coded elements and values are central. The story shows the role that Zhu’s junzi/shunü character plays in keeping her within the norm on the one hand, and in controlling uncomfortable and unfavorable situations on the other. Despite the incompatibility of publicly displaying both junzi and shunü ideals, Zhu simultaneously pursues ideal masculinity and ideal femininity.

In Chinese literature, particularly popular vernacular fiction and drama, the ideal of the junzi character gradually yielded to that of the caizi (talented scholar) character. Over time, the characters and subplots in vernacular literature changed to accommodate the caizi character ideal. The concept of caizi also shifted somewhat throughout its textual history, though less dramatically than that of junzi. Originally used during the Zhou dynasty to refer to a man of high virtue, by the time of the Wei-Jin dynasties (220–420), caizi was used solely to describe a man of literary talent. Later on, in vernacular literature, the term refers broadly to a talented but sociopolitically marginalized young man who falls in love with a young beauty (jiaren). The caizi character I refer to here is the male paragon in caizi-jiaren drama and novels: well-known examples include Zhang Sheng in Xixiang ji and Liu Mengmei in Mudan ting.

The most common caizi characterization combines good looks and literary talent with physical and emotional vulnerability. Talent in music and poetry composition, both basic qualifications for Chinese scholars, is prerequisite to the caizi character and bolsters his romantic air. The fragile, sentimental, and even effeminate scholarly image of the caizi resonates with that of Liang Shanbo in the latter part of the story, first with Liang’s frustration over his inability to marry Zhu, and later in the excessively emotional poems he sends her and his subsequent illness and death from lovesickness. This type of behavior is not commensurate with an ideal junzi character. According to Geng Song, the caizi is a temporary stage of a junzi’s life before he enters the official world. The caizi belongs to the yin world while the junzi is of the yang world. The caizi’s symbolic partaking of a masculine “yin” suggests that there was a newly emerging demand among the literati for ambiguous identities in fiction that could operate contrary to neo-Confucian character ideals and the patriarchal order that underlies them.
In light of the evolution of these two character ideals within the domain of masculinity, we can make a further distinction between caizi and junzi with respect to their contrasting attitudes toward morality and sexuality. Whereas the junzi defines himself through public and social value, with particular emphasis on the official, responsible world, the caizi seeks his own personal interests and desires in his private artistic and intellectual pursuits. Simply speaking, the junzi is a timelessly exemplary man in the official domain, while the caizi is an ideal man from the popular domain, an attractive lover (in talent and appearance) but also a faithful and passionate one. In the later, extended Liang-Zhu versions, Liang is overwhelmed by Zhu Yingtaï's beauty and compelled to pursue his love for her. His sincere attitude toward Zhu identifies him as a zhicheng zhong (true and faithful lover), a description often applied to an ideal man in the caizi-jiaren romances.

Liang's character as a caizi, falling victim to his love, presupposes Zhu as a jiaren, a woman worthy of the love of a caizi. The term jiaren (literally, “beautiful person”) was originally gender neutral but gradually came to be used to refer to a woman of great beauty. While the term early on became associated with the physical beauty of a woman, in caizi-jiaren stories during the Ming-Qing period, it meant a woman of “perfect or true beauty,” which consisted of literary talent, wisdom, courage, fidelity, and sensibility. Such a perfect character as the jiaren, according to Li Zhihong, exists in between the shunü and the shennü (divine woman or goddess) of the poem Gaotang fu (Rhapsody of Gaotang). While the shunü represents virtue and propriety (德禮), viewed as ideal for married life, the shennü in Gaotang fu embodies physical beauty and the pleasure of sexual intercourse (情慾)—a woman desirable for erotic love in the male imagination. The jiaren balances the merits of the shunü and the shennü, and thus is seen as the perfect fit for the caizi character. In extended versions of Liang-Zhu, Zhu’s sexuality is stressed to the extent that her body invites the male gaze. Now imbued with the eroticism of a jiaren, Zhu becomes a desirable wife in an erotic sense. More exact qualities of jiaren are found in Keith McMahon’s discussion of the common characteristics of the classic caizi-jiaren romances. The jiaren in these romances is portrayed as independent and superior (to men), sometimes even cross-dressing as a man to achieve what she wants, including a husband. In this light, Zhu was already a jiaren before her study at the academy. She temporarily suppresses this nature in order to study, but resumes it as soon as she finishes her journey and returns to her home. In this sense, Zhu undergoes three phases: jiaren, junzi/shunü, and once again, jiaren.

This shift in the gender construction of the protagonists not only chan-
nels the story toward heterosexual love but contributes to the construction of Liang-Zhu as a sometimes preposterous but culturally revealing romance. All manner of popular subplots and mundane blessings were added to bring the story closer to the popular *caizi-jiaren* stories. These include a love triangle; the characters’ heavenly origin and karmic affinity (due to their sins in Heaven, they are doomed to experience “separations and unions” for either seven or three lives before they are united); a medical remedy to cure Liang’s lovesickness; and the promise of rewards in the next life, such as Liang’s passing the imperial civil service exam with the highest rank, *zhuangyuan*. Liang’s official career, his achievement by martial valor of *wu* 武 masculinity through his involvement in Daoist/folk-religious magic and military affairs,⁹² and his being blessed with multiple wives and sons are all plotlines that are common in the *caizi-jiaren* stories.⁹³

Significantly, because of this transition, these later versions of the story focus far more on male-centered desire than do the earlier versions, which end with the deaths or the rebirths of Liang and Zhu. In these newer versions, death is merely the price Liang and Zhu must pay to reach their goal of a happy married life. The reduction of Zhu’s role to that of a common gentry wife, longing for her husband’s return, and Liang’s entitlement to (and Zhu’s tolerance of) several other wives as a badge of his official or military achievement epitomize the further assimilation of Liang-Zhu into male-centered *caizi-jiaren* stories.⁹⁴ Historicizing the Liang-Zhu stories reveals yet more difficulty in determining the inception points of versions that interpenetrate and assimilate with *caizi-jiaren* stories. Based roughly on the few available historical references, it appears that the adoption of a *caizi* image had already begun in the *Sipehosi* version, around the early fourteenth century, which portrayed Liang as a victim of passionate love. By the seventeenth century, “Liang Shanbo ge” appeared, with intense emotional emphasis and moral deliberation on virtue, sexuality, and marriage, clearly emulating many elements of *caizi-jiaren* stories (see chapter 2). The *caizi* format dominated the extensive plots of eighteenth- to twentieth-century Liang-Zhu versions and continued to penetrate and supplement other treatments of the *caizi* character with strong eroticism, folk-religious beliefs, and martial masculinity. Yet the original androgynous vision of the characters wielded enormous influence throughout the shift in character ideals and in the evolution of earlier, simple accounts of Liang-Zhu into a full-fledged love story. This transition was geared toward
shifting the emphasis of Liang-Zhu from friendship to love, though it appeared to different degrees from one version to the next, contingent on the time and environment in which these versions were produced. What is certain is that the heterosexual reading of the story, with its interest in love and a happy marriage, is prominent in most of the extended versions I have been able to find from the Ming-Qing period.

I have not been able to pinpoint precisely how and why Liang’s character gradually deviates from the dominant junzi image and becomes intertwined with the image of a romantic hero, other than to emphasize the rise of a popular readership for caizi-jiaren stories. The addition of more complicated plots and situations in the extended Liang-Zhu versions cannot be substantially explained without considering the interaction between the Liang-Zhu story and the caizi-jiaren stories, as well as other subgenres in late imperial China. The extent to which this transition reveals the historical reality of premodern China and Korea remains in question. We can, nonetheless, be sure that a sizable and devoted group of people were interested in this type of romance, just as a comparable population today is interested in paranormal romances.

Given that for many centuries the story either circulated orally or was performed on stage, it is significant that the junzi-caizi transformation earned Liang-Zhu a new role as popular reading material and thus gained its entrance into the book market. Along the way the story absorbed literary and entertainment elements attractive to romance readers. According to Janice Radway, the function of romance stories is to entertain readers, and let them “feel lifted out of their daily routine” and recover an “optimistic outlook which is often very strained in day to day living.” This promise of satisfaction, pleasure, and fulfillment drove the popularity of later Liang-Zhu versions, in which the tragic aspect of the story is correspondingly diminished. Over time, the Liang-Zhu story has instead presented itself as a tale of triumph over a series of delays, misunderstandings, and obstacles that arrives, finally, at a “grand denouement or reunion” (da tuanyuan 大團圓). The popularity of Liang-Zhu as a caizi-jiaren romance continued into the early twentieth century and, although scholars critically derogate these versions, their popularity brought the Liang-Zhu story to a dramatically wider audience.

In modern times, the images of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai have once again shifted. In general, the theme of studying together or male bonding
proved less popular than that of everlasting pure and spiritual love. Yet the absence of physical union, which allowed the story to be praised as one of pure love, is closely tied to the theme of male bonding.\(^97\) Simultaneously, the motifs of occult belief in the afterworld and of mundane blessings after rebirth, which were dominant in the extended versions, are generally rejected in modern versions as a product of the feudal and superstitious past. This modern reading of Liang-Zhu, often based on popular stage versions such as “Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai” (in yueju and caidiao ju) and “Liu yin ji” (chuanju), has produced a new interpretation of ideal Chinese masculinity, composed of elements which echo from the traditional traits of junzi-shunü and caizi-jiaren, such as the absence of sexual union and the concept of dying for love. The popularity of the themes of “no physical union” and “purity” in modern Liang-Zhu readings reflects the legacy of the motif of chaste male bonding, and the tragic ending is consequently favored over that of the grand reunion. The hunger for women’s education in modern times has further enriched the original bold and challenging image of Zhu; Zhu embodies feminist ideas in these modern adaptations.\(^98\)

In most modern versions, Zhu and Liang’s transformation into butterflies, symbolizing the eternity of their love, is retained to convey the traditional bittersweet ending. On the popular commercial stages of modern China, the extravagant representation of the butterfly transformation scene always seems to trump the call, reflected in the earlier extended versions, for a happy ending of rebirth replete with worldly blessings. However, in some operatic editions from the early twentieth century, the ameliorative butterfly motif is omitted so as to present a more realistic tragedy.\(^99\) At the same time, such versions as “Liang Shanbo,” and “Hou Liang Shanbo” in yueju, inherited the caizi-jiaren elements of extended versions like “Mudan ji (nanyin),” and were still performed until a reformed yueju version of Liang-Zhu came to dominance in the 1950s.\(^100\) While a happy ending appealed more to Chinese romance readers, the butterfly transformation of modern Liang-Zhu versions represented a compromise between the modern elites’ desire for tragedy (as we see in the next section) and the popular audience’s demand for a familiar happy ending. After the 1950s, the butterfly transformation was solidified as a representative, necessary element of Liang-Zhu. Liang-Zhu has thus been constantly reconfigured along a y-axis of conflicting emotions between and beyond love and friendship and an x-axis of shifting gender norms bordering on traditional junzi and caizi images, all the while seeking the best possible story each time.
Since the early twentieth century, Liang-Zhu has been best known for the versions that end in tragedy, rather than for the many with happy endings of rebirth and worldly success. As traditional values and cultures were reconsidered and reconstructed to accommodate the new demands of modern China, intellectuals and artists began to reexamine the popular elements of Liang-Zhu tales, and applied a framework of Western aesthetics and poetics to the story.\textsuperscript{101} In particular, the emphasis on tragedy introduced by scholars such as Wang Guowei (1877–1927) greatly influenced the understanding and performance of the tragic ending of Liang-Zhu. Lamenting the lack of tragedy in Chinese theatrical tradition, Wang Guowei, exalted tragedy as “the finest form of literature.”\textsuperscript{102} By presenting “the beautiful and the sublime” (優美壯美之情) as the two major aesthetic experiences of tragedy, he argues that the characters in a tragedy represent the noblest of souls: namely, men (and women) who have delivered themselves through “their release from desires” and “aesthetic contemplation of the suffering of others.”\textsuperscript{103} Wang’s unequivocal esteem for tragedy was widely accepted by Chinese intellectuals,\textsuperscript{104} and Liang-Zhu’s tragic ending readily satisfied their aesthetic requirements. The titles of early twentieth-century versions of Liang-Zhu, such as \textit{Liang Zhu tongshi} 梁祝痛史 (The Painful History of Liang-Zhu, 1926)\textsuperscript{105} and \textit{Liang Zhu aishi} 梁祝哀史 (The Sad History of Liang-Zhu, 1939), testify to the growing appeal of tragic endings. It is in this context that Liang-Zhu came to be regarded as the “Chinese Romeo and Juliet,”\textsuperscript{106} and until recently tragic love was considered its dominant theme.

Scholarly discussion surrounding the cause of Liang and Zhu’s tragic deaths has focused on the conflict between individual desire and social norms, and especially on a branch of Confucian ethics called \textit{lijiao} 禮敎.\textsuperscript{107} Liang and Zhu’s love has been yoked to the social custom of arranged marriage, exemplified in the phrase “parents’ order and matchmaker’s words” (父母之命，媒妁之言). Early modern scholars praised the deaths of Liang and Zhu as a representation of the victory of the unyielding human spirit over all obstacles.\textsuperscript{108} Some scholars, emphasizing the class difference between Liang and Zhu added in some later versions,\textsuperscript{109} have also suggested a revolutionary interpretation of Liang-Zhu, in which Liang’s poverty or his being of lower status than Zhu is considered the main reason for the tragedy.\textsuperscript{110}
Meanwhile, Roland Altenburger has brought critical attention to the performance of gender and emotion in the discourse of Liang-Zhu. Concerning the transition of Liang’s feelings from friendship to love, Altenburger insists that Zhu’s act of gender bending plays a significant role in the development of emotions between Liang and Zhu. Instead of trying to repair the ruptured parts of the transition, Altenburger’s reading proposes the emotional discrepancy as the fundamental problem of the narrative. In his view, the long-standing desires of Liang and Zhu—male bonding and love, respectively—constitute the basic conflict that ultimately leads to the story’s tragic ending. The story places male bonding far above a marital relationship, and Zhu’s jumping into Liang’s tomb is interpreted as an “involuntary act of submission to male-centered values.” This view is convincing (although it’s unlikely that traditional audiences would concur with its radical interpretation of gender), given the powerful attachment between Liang and Zhu and the strength of the idea of male bonding in the Liang-Zhu story. To Liang Shanbo, disrupted male companionship is the fatal loss, which means that Zhu’s death is the only means by which this sacred bond can be restored. Viewed in this light, the narrative of male bonding is indeed privileged over that of heterosexual love.

Although my analysis so far has agreed with much of Altenburger’s analysis, I suggest that his interpretation of Zhu’s death represents, to some degree, an androcentric, passive, and nonreligious reading of Liang-Zhu, ignoring Zhu Yingtai’s active role as a love-seeker and a partner, as well as the meaning of death in folk culture. Viewed through the lens of folk-religious belief in people’s karmic affinity, rebirth, and immortality, Zhu’s death can signify a positive action, performed to earn a just reward. More importantly, Altenburger’s reading overlooks the fact that Zhu Yingtai’s feelings for Liang are a complex combination of male bonding and romantic love that she has built up and maintained by her own strong will. By the same token, Zhu’s acute self-awareness, as seen in her active decision to travel to the academy and enter into a brotherhood oath with Liang Shanbo, is undervalued in readings that emphasize male bonding. The problem lies in the complexity of the various character ideals that define the relationship between Liang and Zhu.

Based on my analysis of Zhu’s character shifting back into that of a jiaren toward the end of the story, her desire for heterosexual union is an important factor in her act of dying. In fact, although male bonding is certainly valued in the story, the protagonists’ desire for a husband-and-wife relation-
ship becomes increasingly explicit as the story approaches its tragic end. For this reason, it is difficult to perceive Zhu’s death solely as the fulfillment of, or yielding to, the desire for male bonding. Paola Zamperini argues that heroines in Ming and Qing literature use suicide to emphasize the strength of their passion. In pointing out how women who commit suicide can be incorrectly interpreted as martyrs to or victims of society, Zamperini helps rectify common misunderstandings of female suicide in the representational realm. In light of this view, Zhu’s suicide should be understood as a deliberate expression of her passion and free will. Throughout the narrative, Zhu’s relationship with Liang demonstrates the extent to which women could engage men and the male world.

The gendered code to which Zhu must adhere, if she is to continue her deep affection for Liang, means that she must secure a legitimate relationship through marriage. But in Zhu’s mind, the two emotions—male bonding and heterosexual love—are connected and not antithetical. What this means is that, in its breadth, Zhu’s love is not the same love that Liang experiences upon first seeing Zhu dressed in female clothing. Zhu’s love entails more than what the word “love” signifies in a modern sense. Liang’s perception of bonding is, in contrast, reserved for the purely homosocial and, in some sense, symbolic homosexual world. Zhu’s journey from the female world to male symbolic order, however, shows that she understands both the homosocial and the homosexual/heterosexual worlds, as she demonstrates by her two oaths, one of brotherhood and one of virginity. For Zhu, there is no clear demarcation between heterosexual love and male bonding. Zhu’s suicide after Liang’s death, whether voluntary or not, should therefore be read as a result of her emotional tie to Liang. It symbolizes her unvanquished will and passion—the same will and passion that launched her academic journey and her friendship with Liang—and is surely a more coherent view to Zhu.

The heart of the tragedy of Liang-Zhu is the conflict that stems from dissimilar expectations of each ideal gender role in human relationships, in which human sentiment, or qing, is embodied. In all Liang-Zhu versions, the emotional themes of friendship (between two men or between a man and a woman) and of love (between a man and a woman) go hand in hand. Through two distinct sets of character ideals—those of junzi-shunü and caizi-jiaren—the focus and interests of the story shift, but they never deviate entirely from this framework. Through this interplay of the narratives of male bonding and love/marriage, the story touches upon the fundamental problems of human relations. We can imagine a different society, in
which Zhu and Liang remaining together as intimate male/female friends is sanctioned. Zhu’s gender play reads as an exploration of the limits of male-female relationship, and even of all existing human relationships.

Recent readings of Liang-Zhu have restored the story’s original theme of male bonding and stressed its effect from a different perspective. For example, in his essay on Liang-Zhu, cultural critic Zhu Dake maintains that Liang-Zhu is originally a narrative of homoeroticism. This interpretation entices LGBT readers into the world of Liang-Zhu. The homosocial feelings and values embedded in Liang-Zhu resonate with the call for freely determined love and marriages.

While Zhu Dake interprets the story as homoerotic, Suo Shaowu objects to the dominant modern view that Liang-Zhu is a love story. He maintains that the recent labeling of Liang-Zhu as the most famous Chinese love story should be withdrawn because the story is not really about mutual love. Suo correctly notes that modern popular versions do not develop the love between Liang and Zhu in a discernible way. Efforts to maintain Liang’s junzi character foreshadow the suppression of his love. This absence of a developed love plot is complemented by the addition of the caizi character and the rhetoric of the young, innocent couple, unversed in the ways of adult love. Suo’s claim reveals an interesting perception of Liang-Zhu; although the text does not include a mature love story (Liang does not fully confess his love for Zhu, and there is no description of any acts of love between them), the story is still labeled a (tragic) love story. Perhaps Paolo Santangelo’s discussion of women and love in the caizi-jiaren stories can give some insight into this:

In order to successfully express the sublime nature of this love it was necessary to proceed to exalt a passion that was partly de-sexualized and to the transfiguration of the Woman, the only attempt made in traditional Chinese literature: the woman becomes ethereal, celestial, and her “floral” nature takes on new significance and dimensions, and “true” love is always less carnal; the male protagonist himself undergoes a process of effemination.

The desexualization of the female protagonist, along with the feminization of the male protagonist, certainly played a role in constructing and appraising an ideal love—and an ideal woman—in the caizi-jiaren stories and other Chinese imaginations of passionate love. In my view, however, it
is more important that Liang-Zhu demonstrates how a tale without explicit eroticism can become a “popular love story” in China. The story’s lack of erotic language renders it an inimitable love story that connects “first love” (and/or friendship)—and not-yet-experienced or fully bloomed sexuality—with the nostalgic sense of youth and the first moments of adult relationship. This labeling is strongly influenced by the popularity of the later extended versions, which firmly established the story as a romantic and erotic icon. The changing images of Liang and Zhu have allowed the narrative to construct gender differently in different times, and to perform the construction of gender both inside and outside the narrative.