Chapter One: Envisioning A Nascent Feminine Agency in Zaishengyuan (Destiny of Rebirth)

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Chapter One

Envisioning A Nascent Feminine Agency in 
Zaishengyuan (Destiny of Rebirth)

The heroine of Zaishengyuan (Destiny of Rebirth), a tanci written by Chen Duansheng (1751-1796), is Meng Lijun, a daughter in a gentry-class family in the southwestern province of Yunnan in the early fourteenth century. To escape from a marriage imposed by the emperor and remain faithful to Huangfu Shaohua, to whom she was originally engaged, Lijun cross-dresses as a man the night before her wedding and flees from home, leaving a self-portrait of her true self as a keepsake for her parents. Later, having taken the civil service examination, Lijun ranks first among all the candidates and is appointed prime minister by the emperor. As a successful and handsome young "man," Lijun is favored by the emperor, who arranges for Lijun to marry Liang Suhua (梁素華), the adopted daughter of an eminent official. It happens that Suhua is actually the daughter of Lijun's former wet nurse Su Yingxue (蘇映雪) and has changed her name after being adopted by the Liang family. Since Suhua and Lijun had grown up together as sisters, the mock union between them, with Suhua's complicity, passes as a happy marriage. Lijun's fiancé, Huangfu Shaohua, is also selected to be an official. Ironically, his mentor is none other than his own betrothed, the cross-dressed Lijun. Love-sick, Shaohua takes Lijun's self-portrait from her parents' home, unaware of Lijun's identity. Shocked by the likeness between the prime minister and the portrait, he confronts the minister and questions "his" identity. Shaohua reveals his suspicion to his sister, who is the empress, as well as the emperor's mother to reveal Lijun's true identity. At a palace banquet, the empress dowager gets the prime minister drunk and has "his" boots taken off, revealing Lijun's bound feet and exposing her real identity. It happens that the emperor intersects with the maid who had taken off Lijun's lotus shoes, and thus hears the secret. Lijun is then pressed by the emperor to become his concubine, under threat of execution. In the last scene in Chen's text, Lijun, enraged by the injustice and suffering damage from the wine, becomes seriously ill and spits blood. Although the direct cause of Lijun spitting blood remains ambivalent, the text implies that the heroine's collapse might be the result of both alcohol damage and heightened stress about the revelation of her real sexuality.
Chen Duansheng was born in Hangzhou, a city of rich intellectual and cultural heritage. Located in the center of the urban Jiangnan region, south of the Yangzi River, Hangzhou was home to many semicloistered women from the gentry who left rich records of their accomplishments. The women's literary culture of the time was manifested in their own works and in elite male authors' writings on and perceptions of these talented women. Chen Duansheng's family looked favorably upon women's education: her grandfather, the famous scholar Chen Zhaolun (陳兆倫, 1701-1771), proposed in the essay "才女說" ("Cainü shuo," "On Talented Women") that women's learning would enable them to better assist their husbands and educate their children, and that education in classics would augment women's virtue (Chen Yinke 15). Chen's family also had frequent contact with the scholars of the time. Her sister Chen Changsheng (陳長生) was a disciple of the renowned scholar Yuan Mei (1716-1797). Both published poetry collections: Duansheng's was titled 繪影閣集 (Huiyingge ji, Collected Poems from the Huiying Chamber) and Changsheng's 繪聲閣集 (Huishengge ji, Collected Poems from the Huisheng Chamber). The title "繫影" ("huiying," depictions of images) suggests Duansheng's precise imitative strategies in characterization. Although the original text of this poetry collection is lost, critics suggest that some of the poems might have been embedded in the introductory poems to the chapters of Destiny of Rebirth (Chen Yinke 25).

Among current scholarship on this tanci, Mark Bender's doctoral thesis in 1995 offers a substantial analysis and translations of exerpts of Zaishengyuan. Bender's research, in addition to a formalistic analysis of the text, extends the study of the novel to its broader sociocultural context by discussing modern adaptations of Meng Lijun's story in Suzhou tanci performances (see Bender, Zaisheng yuan). Hu Siao-chen, in her book-length study on tanci published in 2008, situates Chen's tanci, along with several other tanci before and after Chen's work, as constitutive of steps toward the establishment of a late imperial and early modern women's narrative tradition in China. Framing her reading of Chen's tanci in the context of the vast "reading community" of tanci consisting mainly of women, Hu states that Chen's work is composed for an "imagined" readers' community including elite women readers in the inner chambers (Hu, Cainü 6). Hu argues that Chen's choice of focusing on Lijun's cross-dressing accentuates the heroine's incongruity and conflict with social orthodoxy in the Confucian society; additionally, Chen's refined narrative strategies and structure contribute to an unprecedented aesthetic achievement in the tanci genre (Hu, Cainü 6). Ying Zou, in her 2012 essay on this tanci, traces the cross-dressing tropes in the text and traditions of tanci fiction, and suggests that these tales of women disguised as men reflect the "limitations of feminine authority," citing Nancy Armstrong (Zou, "Cross-Dressing" 147). Zou further proposes that Chen's work, rather than representing a feminist tale in the modern sense, suggests that the author conceded to traditional moral values and that female "agency is represented . . . by participation in the constitution of norms" (148).

These readings of Chen's tanci offer nuanced and situated interpretations of Chen's work in the tradition of late imperial Chinese women's written narratives,
and emphasize this tanci's cultural specificities in representing feminine identities in contrast with modernist, feminist interpretations of cross-dressing and gender performance in the Western context. This chapter, in answering to and resuscitating research works on Chen's tanci, endeavors to expand studies of the work. Continuing current scholarly dialogues on Chen's tanci, this chapter further interrogates and renegotiates the modern/pre-modern theoretical paradigm underlying the critical positioning of women's tanci fiction. Whereas Chen's depiction of female cross-dressing indeed creates a different incentive than modern and contemporary feminist discourses on gender performance, Lijun's story projects imaginary transgressions of dominant gender roles for women in the orthodox Confucian society and plants seeds of women's individual empowerment. When contextualized in the tradition of historical and literary women's cross-dressing in pre-twentieth-century China, Lijun's tale epitomizes a legacy of female autonomy and power, and it bears social and historical relevance to today's audience beyond native Chinese communities. Rather than relying solely on a feminist critical stance in deciphering the texts, or entirely rejecting such a perspective, this study suggests that Chen's tanci inspires readers to formulate a new theoretical language for interpreting feminine identities as represented in non-Western, untranslated, and understudied women's narrative traditions. Continuing Hu Siao-chen's inquiry into the work as part of a burgeoning feminine narrative tradition in late imperial China, this study explores the narratological resonances between Chen's tanci and other dynastic storytelling genres, including women's poetry, fiction, and drama. This comparative narratological approach to Chen's tanci can be instrumental in revealing both the ethical and aesthetic values of Chen's tale, values that carry its cross-cultural resonance to audiences of women's literature in China and beyond.

According to Chen Yinke's study, Chen Duansheng's mother was born into a branch of the Wang family in Zhejiang province (15). The Wang family was prominently wealthy and also paid serious attention to literary studies. Chen's great-great-grandfather Wang Sen (汪森) built a family library and frequently welcomed literary scholars. Due to their distinguished literary achievements, the Wang family enjoyed fame and official titles (119). Coming from such a family, Chen's mother might have been well educated in literature. As Zaishengyuan reveals, Chen's mother divided poetry rhymes for her and her sister to practice writing. Similar evidence of motherly education in literature are available in Chen Changsheng's poetry collection Huishengge ji. The death of Chen's mother might also have been a reason why Chen stopped writing for a long time. Zhang Dejun points out that Chen's work became extremely popular in Zhejiang and the Southwest province, possibly due to the fact that her maternal grandfather Wang Shangyu (汪上堉) governed Yunnan province. During his governance Wang was diligent in his service to the local people and was commemorated in temples. Chen's father Chen Yudun (陳玉敦) and her cousin Wang Ruyang (汪如洋) were both appointed officials in Yunnan province in the late 1780s. It was also possible that Chen's tanci text was brought to Yunnan by Chen's maternal family to prolong the family influence in the province. This discovery
about Chen's maternal family reveals the possible influence of family learning on Chen's literary career and further illustrates how women writers' maternal families could continue to play supportive roles for their literary endeavors and the dissemination of their writings.

This family background may have played a crucial supportive role in Chen Duansheng's ambitions as a writer. Although her solitary existence almost relegated her to obscurity, traces of her life are evident in autobiographical statements embedded in Zaishengyuan. Before her marriage, she finished the first seventeen juan (sections or volumes) of Zaishengyuan. Her marriage to a lower-level official, Fan Tan (范菼), had an important impact on her literary pursuits, as several years into the marriage Fan Tan was involved in a political scandal concerning the civil service examination and was banished to the frontier region of Xinjiang (新疆). The identity of Chen's husband has provoked controversy among scholars (see Li Kaixuan, Jisu). However, Chen's writings show that she was left alone to support two children and her parents-in-law and had little time to continue writing. Her husband's scandal also forced her to retreat from intellectual exchanges with other women. Her forced silence is dramatically juxtaposed with the imaginary autonomy of the gender-bending heroine of Zaishengyuan.

Although Zaishengyuan was one of the most influential and extensively reprinted tanci works, several previous pieces popularized the genre; one such tanci is the seventeenth-century Yuchuanyuan (Jade Bracelets), which provided the story from which Chen's tanci developed its own plot as a sequel. Though the authorship of Yuchuanyuan remains unknown, the chapters' introductory poems and the epigraph of the book suggest that the authors were a daughter and a mother, the daughter being the main author (Bao 87). Yuchuanyuan recounts the story of a young man, Xie Yuhui (謝玉輝), and his sister, Xie Yujuan (謝玉娟), who exchange identities. The male protagonist Xie cross-dresses as his sister in order to rescue his fiancée, whom the emperor has selected as a royal attendant. Correspondingly, his sister disguises herself as her brother to take the civil service examination, as a result of which she is selected as a top candidate and becomes an imperial official. Although the text portrays a striking subversion of male and female gender roles, it ends with the hero reverting to his real sexuality and marrying several women characters. Yujuan ultimately discloses her cross-dressing to the emperor and then marries a royal heir.

Chen's Zaishengyuan adopts this narrative frame, relating the tale of Meng Lijun, the cross-dressed reincarnation of Zheng Ruzhao (鄭如昭), who was Yujuan's sworn sister and also the second wife of Xie Yuhui in Yuchuanyuan (Jade Bracelets). The title, Zaishengyuan (Destiny of Rebirth), suggests this intertextual bond between the two tanci and that the characters are reincarnated to fulfill their destiny in the sequel. The two works, though, have fundamental differences. Jade Bracelets portrays a central character who disguises himself as his sister to save his fiancée from the inner palace. The work ends with the polygamous marriage of Yuhui to his fiancée and several other women. Zaishengyuan restructures the story
around the cross-dressed heroine Lijun, who repeatedly denies her feminine identity to postpone the marriage event. Lijun's fiancé Shaohua plays the role of a constant "spouse," ironically reverting the Confucian code of women's chastity with a representation of male "widowhood."

Lijun is modeled on Yuhui's concubine Zheng Ruzhao in Yuchuanyuan. Zheng is wrongly accused of adultery by Cao Yanniang (曹燕娘), another of Xie's concubines. Indignant at her husband's unjust treatment of her, Ruzhao takes a vow of celibacy, abstaining from intimacy with Yuhui; she swears that if they are at all acquainted in their ensuing lives, she will never again become Xie's concubine. This unsettled relationship between Ruzhao and Yuhui serves as the backdrop for Lijun's romance with Shaohua, foreshadowing her refusal to become Shaohua's wife in a polygamous marriage. The author effectively transforms the discontented Ruzhao into the central character of Lijun, perhaps to compensate for Ruzhao's slighted feelings in the original story. As the tale unfolds, however, the cross-dressed Lijun acquires self-sufficiency as a "man," thanks to her exceptionally successful performance. When Lijun's ability to exercise social, political, and intellectual power surpasses Shaohua's, Lijun is no longer harnessed to a marriage with a predestined spouse.

Chen's adaptation may suggest an authorial desire to reinvest in and morally elevate several of the minor characters in Jade Bracelets, particularly the women—to see them pursue their unfulfilled desires through another round of worldly encounters. For example, Lijun's bosom sister and "wife" Su Yingxue is based on the humble and lowly born Chen Fangsu (陳芳素), one of Xie Yuhui's concubines in Jade Bracelets. In contrast to the less developed original character Chen, Su Yingxue is portrayed with liveliness and psychological depth, and she demonstrates a heroic spirit by performing a number of extraordinary deeds. In Destiny of Rebirth, Yingxue stands in for Lijun on the night of marriage and ventures to assassinate the bridegroom Liu Kuibi, who, defeated by Shaohua in his initial attempt to court Lijun, attempts to murder Shaohua and falsely accuses Shaohua's father of betraying the emperor while he was fighting against the invading Koreans. If Su Yingxue, as a surrogate of Lijun, represents the ideal of feminine chastity and self-sacrifice, her role is also transformed gradually after she is rescued from suicide by the Liang family, takes on the name of Liang Suhua, and marries the cross-dressed Lijun, who is now the prime minister. Meng Lijun and Liang Suhua's mock marriage, as their surnames imply, refers to the legendary couple Meng Guang (孟光) and Liang Hong (梁鴻) of Eastern Han (25–220 CE), illustrating a cross-dressed Meng Lijun playing the role of the ideal husband Liang Hong. The poet in exile Liang Hong and his wife Meng Guang were a couple in the first century. Everyday when Liang returned from the field, Meng Guang would prepare a meal for him and serve the bowl level to her eyebrows, to show her esteem for her husband. The expression "serving the bowl level to one's eyebrows" was then passed down as a synonym for an ideal couple who treat each other with respect (Liu Xiang, Xu Leiniu zhuany 2: 8, 10a-b). The relationship between the protagonist and the other characters is suggestive of an extensive pattern of gender displacement and reversal.
Like Su Yingxue, another elevated minor character in Jade Bracelets is Liu Yanyu (劉燕玉), who rescues Shaohua from her brother Liu Kuibi's plan to murder him, and, admiring Shaohua's talent, is secretly betrothed to him. Liu Yanyu is, in the original story, Cao Yanniang, who is overwhelmed with jealousy of the other concubines and cannot ascend to heaven after her death. In Destiny of Rebirth, heaven grants Cao the opportunity to repent her wrongdoings by serving as Shaohua's wife and performing virtuous deeds. In contrast to her precursor, the invidious and slanderous Yanniang, Yanyu is depicted as a devoted daughter and a chaste and kindhearted wife. When the newly wedded Shaohua vows three years of celibacy in order to wait for Lijun's return, Yanyu accepts his decision with no complaint, devoting herself to her filial duties to Shaohua's parents. By reinvesting in these minor characters, and by transforming the mistreated Ruzhao into a cross-dresser of free will, Chen's Zaishengyuan remodels the power relations between the characters and overturns the subjectivities of the shrew and the virtuous, the powerless and the powerful, the female and the male.

Shifting the historical background from the Song dynasty in Jade Bracelets to the Yuan period, Chen's tanci includes an extended depiction of the formerly marginalized women characters and transforms the male protagonist. The male cross-dresser in Jade Bracelets, Xie Yuhui, is reborn as Shaohua, with a twin sister, Zhanghua. Readers of the original tale may suppose that Chen has split Xie into two characters, with Zhanghua as the female "other" of Shaohua. Whereas Shaohua is an idealized, gallant hero, Zhanghua represents the heroic and potentially transgressive aspects of Xie. Outstanding in both literary talent and military skills, she assists her father in official duties and takes a soldier's role in the battlefield. The narrator applauds her exceptional aptitudes: "Riding a horse herself she thrusts forward into a thousand enemies, with two steel blades she can fight against ten thousand soldiers. In tranquility she takes the needle and does embroidery in the perfumed chamber, in leisure time she takes a ride on the grassland." When the Huangfu family is falsely accused of betraying the emperor by the perfidious Liu Kuibi, the elder sister Zhanghua protects their mother from the family peril and flees into the wilderness. She befriends the cross-dressed Madame Wei Yong'e, who governs a group of male rebels in a mountainous area. Together the two openly claim disobedience against the emperor. Zhanghua even organizes a woman's troop called "孝女兵" ("Xiaonü bing," The Army of Devoted Daughters), claiming that her militarism is justified by the rescue of her parents (477-81). When Liu Kuibi (劉奎壁) leads a royal army to suppress the "rebels" led by the two women, Zhanghua, who masters Daoist alchemy, defeats Liu's army with her magical powers and captures Liu alive. In comparison to the effeminate Shaohua, Zhanghua is notably superior in knowledge and military intelligence, showing a heroic spirit through her open and sometimes radical challenges against tyranny. Zhanghua's transgressive character is largely justified by her devotion to her parents. When the emperor finds out the Liu family's plot against the Huangfus and redeems the honor and official title of the Huangfu family, she leads the rebels and surrenders to the emperor, and becomes the emperor's concubine. The author
foreshadows Zhanghua's fate, saying, "A daughter like this from a general's family is truly unrivaled; she surely deserves the fortune of marrying into the royal family."

The intertextuality of tanci creates a symbiotic relationship between stories. The alignment of tanci texts with prior texts also reflects the oral traditions in which tanci originated, for every story follows a previous story and anticipates its continuation in a subsequent narration. It is through this process that tanci has developed its own durability as a narrative tradition. Destiny of Rebirth preserves the traditional oral storyteller's technique of opening and closing a tale with poems. The first chapter of each volume begins with an introductory poem, which is followed by the main story, written mostly in seven-character rhymed lines, with intermittent vernacular prose passages.

In these introductory poems, the author recurrently alludes to her writing brush as the "brush of vivid colors," a reference to literary and artistic talent. This allusion is frequently evoked by literati poets to foreground their talent and depict moments of lofty thought and poetic rapture. The "brush of vivid colors" alludes to the male poet Jiang Yan (江淹, 450 CE-589 CE). In his youth, Jiang dreamed that he was given a magic brush with five colors, with which he wrote many splendid poems (Li Yanshou 1: 209). Chen Duansheng's use of the image asserts that she is endowed with a talent equal to that of literati poets, as in this chapter opening:

In tranquility I sit by the studio window, contemplating the past,
At times I collect scattered thoughts to compose new lines.
The brush of vivid colors makes thick ink strokes,
Enlivening delicate insights, eliciting astute ideas.
The subject of the book is filial devotion and loyalty,
My humble self composed the comments in the opening poems.
Since my devoted audience hopes to hear more after reading the previous work,
I shall write this work as a sequel and enjoy it with them. (1: 1, 2)

In another chapter opening she writes, "Without reserve I consecrate my spirit to the brush, / and infuse my passion and thoughts entirely into the book. / . . . May the three-inch pointed brush in my hand / Bring into being / Countless events in Destiny of Rebirth" (14: 53, 531). The brush metaphor also reflects the visual quality of Chen's writing, as brushes were used for both painting and writing. How do tanci facilitate a specific form of imagination and desire—for the author, the characters, and the women readers? What does the narrative lens of tanci reveal about late imperial women's conception of selfhood? These questions invite a reading of Destiny of Rebirth beyond that of tanci, and draw attention to the "cultural and social function" of women's writing as "a technology of self-inscription and communication" which is well-displayed in other literary genres of this period, such as Qing women's poetry (Fong, Herself an Author 144). In Chen's tanci, authorial insertions set the stage by communicating the author's emotion, locale, and time of writing, and contribute to the pluralistic presences of the author, her upheavals of thoughts, and her passionate longings (Berg, "Female Self-Fashioning" 238-89). The author's narrative
self-portrait endows her presence with a certain independence and autonomy, declaring her transcendent perspective in a timeless historical background. It is through this narrative frame that the author portrays the evolvement of Lijun from a genteel elite woman to a heroic protagonist who performs as man's social and political equal with great success.

The scene in which Lijun paints a self-portrait, which may be compared with similar examples of women making and viewing portraits in late imperial China, provides useful material for considering the relation between portraits of women and their gendered spectatorship as well as the ironical relationship between women and their painted images. The trope of women painting self-portraits is recurrent in theatrical and novelistic narratives of the late imperial period, and is particularly associated with the theme of women's artistic agency. In this scene, before leaving home to escape the arranged marriage with Liu Kuibi, Lijun leaves her parents a portrait by copying an image of herself as seen in her mirror:

Lijun stands up, facing the mirror,
And rearranges her make-up and embroidered dress.
Gazing at the mirror, she lets out a sigh at times,
Thinking to herself that she has to change her girl's appearance soon.
No longer will she sit by this window and put flower pins in her hair,
beneath the tree, on a spring morning.
No longer will she sit near this warm stove,
and put on the sweetly perfumed clothes.
From now on, she will travel in wind and rain and stop at roadside inns.
From now on, she will be a lonesome one riding across mountainous regions.
"I am a fledgling swallow that loses its nest and is chased by arrows.
I am a damaged flower petal fallen from the tree and drifting in the wilderness.
Once I change my appearance and leave home,
When will come the day of my return?"
This refined girl looks into the mirror, with sorrows surging in her heart;
She strives to bestir herself, though her sleeves are wet with tears. . . . (3: 10, 280)

[Lijun looks into the mirror and compares her reflection with the portrait.]
Cloud-like hair rolled up in a fine coil,
A golden hairpin parting the hair at one side of her forehead.
Face fresh as a lotus flower bathed in jade-like dew droplets,
Eyebrows two willow leaves carrying spring mist.
Adorned with plum flower petals, her brow is all the more lovely.
Rarely do words depart from her cherry-like mouth.
Almond-shaped eyes, gazing attentively, reflect the limpid light of autumn waters.
Snowy complexion is nicely set off with crimson blushes.
Bright pink skirts hide her gentle footsteps;
A dark cape hugs her pale blue shirt.
Dark sleeves softly conceal her fair wrists;
The skirt sways slightly to reveal a lotus foot.
Her elegant manner outshines many,
Truly incomparable among those of her generation.
Lijun examines the portrait,  
And cannot but sigh for her misfortune.  
"Many times I have seen beautiful women.  
None of them can rival this painted image.  
Can it be that my appearance is not as stunning as the painting?  
Is it much lovelier than my real person?  
If the image truly resembles myself,  
I shall take the lead among women and rise to the top of the world."  
Turning to her maid Ronglan, she asks if the image resembles her,  
Or is the image even more attractive?  
The maid leaps in joy  
And says, "This painting is a triumph,  
For the eyes, the eyebrows and even the attitude are all identical,  
Not to mention the stature, as slender as my mistress's.  
If you really want to compare the image and the person,  
My mistress is certainly more spirited."  
The talented girl, upon these words, is finally convinced,  
And then spreads out the painting on the desk to ponder it again. (3: 10, 280)

At this moment, the portrait functions as an extended screen through which the woman interacts with her projected image, as well as the very surface that activates and meets the gaze of the viewer/reader. Lijun's gaze at the mirror is a secondary process of identification, a process through which the subject is anxiously in search of a self-image. This search is not gratified, for the image mirrors the subject’s discordance with reality. The portrait is modeled on her feminine appearance, which is about to be changed. The poised woman's body is inadvertently caught in a moment of anticipation and indeterminacy. "The lotus foot" refers to Lijun's bound feet, a fetishized sexual symbol of women in the late imperial period. Rearranging her make-up and embroidered dress, Lijun is hesitant to accept the drastic change into men's clothing, comparing herself to "a fledgling swallow that loses its nest," "a damaged flower petal . . . drifting in wilderness." Her gaze into the mirror brings sorrow and a fear of loss.

Accompanying the woman's gaze at her own image in the mirror is a reflection of the subject's split sense of self. Her tears reflect her anxiety and fear at the threshold of the unbearable outside world. Lijun's gaze into the mirror corresponds to a transitional moment between the imaginary and symbolic registers of her subjectivity. She is both the active agent looking at herself, and the elusive image which is being looked at. In this narcissistic moment, the subject is entranced with the captivating image of the self. Lijun is caught up in the discrepancy between her own internal desire or longing to stay in the "perfumed chambers" and the necessity to confront a world of vicissitudes and danger on her own.

To make a self-portrait, the artist needs to fix his or her own image in a certain symmetry and bridge the difference between the body felt from within and the image perceived in the painting. Lijun's self-recognition takes place when the maid assures Lijun about the evident resemblance between herself and the painting. Lijun's girl's hairdo and dress in the portrait betray her resistance to the parents' arrangements for
her marriage, even though the painting was made to demonstrate her devotion to her parents. The notion of women's filial devotion carries multifaceted meanings in the late imperial period. Hu Ying, regarding married daughters’ filial devotion at the turn of the twentieth century, notes that the language and sentiments of such devotion facilitated a substantial expansion of women's rights. Hu considers filial devotion a gendered category and argues that it plays an important role in expanding what a literati daughter can claim as an intellectual inheritance, in providing legal documents for a daughter's right to legal inheritance, and in offering a conduit for women's participation in political changes (Hu Ying, "How Can a Daughter" 234-69). The protagonist exploits the irony implicit in her self-exhibition: she is at once the artist and the object of the artist's gaze. Employing the mirror as a tool of a reversed gaze, Lijun shifts her "gaze" from the "window" to the "flower pins in her hair," from the "warm stove" to her "sweetly perfumed clothes." This reversed look sets the visual structure in motion, by now positioning Lijun with the readers, allowing both parties a refracted look at the inner chamber. The text thus invites the readers to become active participants by "seeing" Lijun through reading.

The image of the protagonist is remarkably dramatized in the visual narrative underlying the text. Lijun is an active agent of looking, whereas the authorial position is that of a detached and disembodied eye with the vantage necessary to see the subject as she is. Compelled to achieve a likeness between the image and the person, Lijun relies on the portrait to mimetically represent herself with accuracy. Yet for the woman artist, the mirror/portrait trope here is not a symbol of desired objectivity, but a medium for self-representation and endorsement.

On top of all this, and markedly in control of what the readers see, Lijun also shows her literary talent by composing a poem on the portrait itself.

What's the use of sighing in regret, when a grave calamity befalls a person?
How can I allow my purity to be eroded, like a flawed jade?
No longer will I cling to my parents for shelter from upheaval;
To preserve my chastity I shall exile myself to terrains remote.
A paper kite with a broken string, I will float away with no destination.
With a handbag of gold jewelry, I can travel to places distant.
Today I leave this painted image of myself, hanging it up on the wall,
For I would change this feminine coif into an official's coif. (3: 10, 100-01)

The poem, and the painting of which it is a part, travel through the story. First, Lijun flees from home, leaving her self-portrait and the poem for her parents. Then Lijun's fiancé Huangfu Shaohua, who thinks Lijun has already passed away, asks for the portrait from Lijun's parents and discovers Lijun's secret cross-dressing by reading the poem. In late Ming and early Qing visual culture, poems composed on paintings reflected "a dialogic relation" between the painted image and the observer who composed the poem on the painting (Mao, "Gu Taiqing" 56). While poems composed about paintings can be used by the viewers to reconstruct details of paintings that have been lost (Mao, "Yige qingdai" 56), poems inscribed on the paintings
likely served to enrich the viewers' experience of interacting with the painted image. In Lijun's case, her portrait draws attention to her status as a talented woman of artistic and literary accomplishment. The poem on the portrait is an exemplar of a mirror-text, which foreshadows the progression of the plot and adds tension to the narrative.

In portraits, the woman's body becomes marked, valued, and preserved in the form of brush strokes. Judith Zeitlin notes that the so-called 美人圖 (meiren tu) or beautiful woman portrait in the late Ming drama of the sixteenth century is affiliated with the body, in that the painting is also a material object, a hanging scroll (Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange* 138; also see Li, Xiaorong, "The 'One Hundred Beauties' Genre" 617-53). Destiny of Rebirth invites an investigation of the theme of "portrait narratives," foregrounding the visual trope of Lijun's self-portrait as a lens for considering issues of identity and subject formation. The heroine's speculating gaze at her self-portrait reveals the gulf between visual mimicry and the character's subjectivity (on mimicry and self-representation in response to the gaze, see Silverman 201). Despite her expectation of making an image that truly resembles her person, Lijun is frustrated in her first attempt to paint the self-portrait:

Her heart full of pain,
Lijun wonders how to depict her real image.
"If the painting does not resemble the person,
I should not bother to take up the brush.
Alas, Meng Lijun, Meng Lijun!
You are so beautiful;
Why do you have to suffer so much misfortune!
If the painting cannot be made satisfactorily,
Doesn't this predict an ominous future for my trip?
If the trip cannot realize my wishes,
I would rather
Hang myself on the day of the wedding!" (3: 10, 99)

The 真容 (zhenrong), or real image, is used in late imperial literature to refer to a portrait of a person. Interestingly, the term carries a great deal of irony itself, for the assertion of women is always in the absence of real women. Compelled to achieve a likeness between the image and the person, Lijun relies on the portrait to mimetically represent herself. Also, for the woman artist, the mirror/portrait trope here is a potent medium for self-representation and endorsement. One may surmise that for genteel women authors, the self-portrait exposes their desire to acquire an extended life after death: the painted image is complementary to their written words, for their disadvantaged literary status does not allow them the possibility of being remembered by their writings.

In contrast to the male literati's voyeuristic appreciation of feminine beauty in imperial China, women had a tradition of painting their own portraits and making statements about their ideals through these painted images. Some women also composed poems for their friends' paintings. Men and women's different gendered points of view have led to contested interpretations of the woman's image in literary writings (for men's scopophilic pleasure in fashioning women's voices in literati
poetry, see Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine" 69-72; for a discussion of the male gaze in 詞 (ci, lyric poetry), see Fong, "Engendering the Lyric" 107-44). A portrait scenario that exemplifies the troublesome relationship between portraits and women's self-representation is associated with the famous and possibly fictitious courtesan poet Feng Xiaoqing (馮小青, 1595-1612), who insisted on having a "real image" of herself painted before she died of tuberculosis at seventeen (Xu Zhen 1: 1-36). In her leisure time, Xiaoqing enjoyed gazing at her reflection in the lake, often becoming engrossed in an imaginary dialogue with herself. In one of her well-known poems, "怨" ("Yuan," "Regret"), she writes: "With fresh make-up I rival the beauties in the portraits, / Knowing not how I would rank among them. / By the autumn lake I gaze at the reflection of my emaciated body, / You shall take pity on me as I on you take pity" (1: 23).

Recalling Lijun's own narcissistic gaze, the poem stages an intriguing conversation between the poet and her reflection, to which Xiaoqing appeals for pity and understanding. Xiaoqing's self-reflexive gaze reveals her subjectivity as constructed through a series of images, which are transmitted from the portraits to the audience and back again. The last line of Xiaoqing's poem expands the visual structure by establishing an emotive bond between the text and the audience, from whom the poet invites a compassionate response. However, this emotive connection between the painted woman and the viewer is resolutely demarcated by the gendered positions of the audience. Extensively recycled by literati scholars, Xiaoqing's pathetic image may be only a construction of the male intellectuals of the time and of later generations, reflecting a male-oriented connoisseurship of feminine pathos and passive beauty. Ellen Widmer suggests that Xiaoqing's life "may be said to be a life waiting for legend to discover, or else the representation of a life that legend provided for people who needed to believe in her" ("Xiaoqing's Literary Legacy" 113). The image of the ailing Xiaoqing, beautiful as it is, lacks gendered agency and power. The "Xiaoqing lore" illustrates the complex and polemical relationship between the literate woman and her readers, whose points of view are profoundly conditioned by their own gendered positions (Ko, Teachers 93).

The fascinating scene of Lijun painting the self-portrait also recalls a similar scenario in the popular Ming dynasty drama 牡丹亭 (Mudanting, The Peony Pavilion; 1598), which serves as an important subtext for Chen's tanci. The protagonist Du Liniang (杜麗娘), the daughter of a high official, takes a walk in a spring garden. She falls asleep, and in a dream she encounters a young scholar named Liu Mengmei (柳夢梅). Afterward she dies of love-sickness, leaving a self-portrait in the garden where they first "met." Later Mengmei finds Liniang's portrait in the garden. Liniang's ghost visits Mengmei and comes back to life three years later with Mengmei's assistance, and marries him. This play has enjoyed enormous popularity among both male and female readers since the sixteenth century. For example, Wei Hua offers an analysis of an early Qing commentarial edition of Tang's play Caizi Mudanting (The Genius Peony Pavilion, first printed during the Yongzheng reign; 1723-1735) (see Hua, Wei, "On Feminine Consciousness"). The critic of the play, according to
the preface of the text, is a female author called A Bang. This commentarial edition of *Mudanting* is exceptional because of "its encyclopedic content, its erotic commentary, and its selection by the female author of a female readership as the commentarial audience" (Hua, "How Dangerous" 741).

The popularity of Tang's play among women can be attributed to its illustration of "a young woman's love against the Neo-Confucian view of reason and of moral orthodoxy" (Hua, Wei, "How Dangerous" 749). When the love-sick Linhao finds the splendor of her looks fading due to illness, she hastens to make a self-portrait to preserve on paper her beauty at its zenith. Scrutinizing her own reflection in the mirror, she replicates that image in her self-portrait and urges her maid to compare her with it. This well-known episode in the play is seamlessly adapted into the scene of Lijun making her self-portrait in Chen's *tanci*. The theme of death and resurrection in *The Peony Pavilion* is also built into Destiny of Rebirth, explicitly resonating with the title, for instance. Similar motifs of karmic death and incarnation can also be found the seventeenth-century play 鴛鴦夢 (*Yuanyangmeng*, Dream of the Mandarin Ducks), by a woman playwright Ye Xiaowan (1613-1657). The play takes the form of a northern-style drama and is the only surviving text of a play written by a woman during the Ming period. Ye Xiaowan was the daughter of Ye Shaoyuan, who edited and published *Wumengtang ji* (Dream of the Meridian Hall), a collection of family women's poems and essays, containing writings by Ye's wife and daughters, as well as stories by genteel women authors who were related to the Ye family. Lijun's pathos at the sight of her portrait thus also reflects the woman's encounter with a life-and-death situation: her old home lost, her future abode undetermined. The rebirth or resurrection of Lijun's self, as a man, is inexorably connected to the viewing and transmission of her self-portrait, a surrogate for her person.

The ironic split between Lijun's self-portrait and her cross-dressed body is also associated with the coalescence and conflict of *The Peony Pavilion* and Destiny of Rebirth on the narrative level. As Wei Hua argues, *The Peony Pavilion* shows that "what cannot exist by virtue of reason or principle (li) can exist because of passion (qing)" (Hua, Wei, "How Dangerous" 749). The play is a vintage "woman-oriented" tale, with its narrative focus on the protagonist's discovery of love in a dream and her extraordinary experience crossing the boundary of life and death in search of love. Destiny of Rebirth sets the locus of the narrative on the protagonist's desire, while at once exposing a deviation, a kind of nonclosure, toward the end of the story. Unlike the resurrected Linhao, who is joyously reunited with Mengmei, the cross-dressed Lijun does not desire a consummated marriage, nor can she relinquish her prosperous official position for the role of a devoted wife and daughter possessed of filial piety. This disparity between the two texts reflects Chen's symptomatic anxiety concerning a woman's proper place in family and society (Zou, Ying, "Responding to *The Peony Pavilion*" 176-84). The author reconfigures the traditional theme of a woman in a painting coming to life in response to male desire, by rendering the cross-dresser Lijun an equivalent of a ghost, who leaves her body and "freely pursues its private, illicit desires" (Zeitlin, "Embodying the Disembodied"). Also, the
classic episode of Liniang dreaming of her lover Mengmei in *The Peony Pavilion* was adopted in the depiction of a minor character Liang Suhua, who, originally named Su Yingxue, was Lijun's bosom sister and later becomes her "wife" in a mock marriage. At the beginning, Lijun's parents hold an archery contest for the many young men who hope to marry her. Huafu Shaohua ranks first among all the candidates. Su Yingxue, who was then a maid at Lijun's house, manages to get a glimpse of Shaohua by peeping through the curtains. That night Xingxue dreams of a romantic rendezvous with Shaohua (1: 3, 164). In her dream, Yingxue and Shaohua make a private marriage arrangement. The author draws a comparison between Yingxue and Liniang: "Apparently today's Su Yingxue bears a resemblance to the legendary Du Liniang" (1: 3, 164). This reference to *The Peony Pavilion* as a subtext foreshadows the possibility of Xingxue and Lijun both marrying Shaohua. However, Du Liniang's story is not completely transplanted in *Destiny of Rebirth*. The closure of a happy marriage in *The Peony Pavilion* is only projected as one of the possible choices for the cross-dressed Lijun, who later becomes reluctant to live her life as a woman again. The presence of Lijun invites spectators to gauge an aesthetic image of the woman from the portrait, and simultaneously unveils the dubious and constructed nature of the portrait itself.

When Lijun cross-dresses and flees from her home to escape an imposed marriage, her decision to dress as a man is made under the influence of two fictional characters, Liu Qingyun (柳卿雲) and Xie Xiang’e (謝湘娥), who impersonate men to escape from family crises and attain a grand fortune and long-lasting fame. Liu Qingyun and Xie Xiang’e were both women characters who cross-dressed and earned eminence after becoming top graduates in the civil service exam. Lijun ponders: "If I cross-dress and flee home, / I may follow the examples of Xie Xiang’e and Liu Qingyun. / If I become the Top Candidate in the Exam and meet the Emperor, / It will indeed display the outstanding talent of women in the inner chambers . . . / If I don't commit myself to this goal and become a heroic woman, / What's the use of having all these talents?" (3: 10, 274) (various versions of the Liu and Xie story appear in 小金錢 [Xiaojinqian, Little Gold Coins]; see also Tan and Tan, *Tanci xulu* 132-34).

After Lijun changes into the attire of a male scholar, she examines her new look in the mirror. This intriguing scene shows Lijun's self-reflective gaze directed to an image of herself disguised as a man, a visual act almost antithetical to the gaze toward her girl's appearance in the previous scene in which she ponders her self-portrait. When Lijun paints a self-portrait of herself as a girl before she flees home, the text depicts her painting and pondering her figure in front of the mirror and the portrait, which can be considered in two ways. It first recalls the scenario of the beauty portrait in late imperial literature, which is reflective of male intellectuals' connoisseurship of idealized women. In Chen's text, Lijun's examination of her self-portrait is antithetical to and sets off the later scene of her gazing at her disguised look after cross-dressing, foreshadowing the rebirth of Lijun's identity as a man's equal. The text stages an intense visual drama in which the woman's disguised body becomes emblematic of a gender trans/formation process. This process reflects the
"deconstructive nature of the transvestite performance," which is "always undoing itself as part of its process of self-enactment" (Garber 149). In this self-confessing scene, the text displays a transition from a third-person narrator to a distinctive first-person voice. Lijun's feminine voice gradually dissolves in the following lines when she finishes her "transformation" and begins to imitate a man's manners. The text deftly returns to a third-person narrative voice, listing the details of "his" appearance, with minimum use of gendered pronouns.

Afraid to be seen by someone else,
Lijun lets down the curtain and sits by the back window.
In the candlelight she hastens to open the mirror,
And gently combs the hair into a man's coiffure.
Then she removes the red candle and opens the golden trunk,
Takes out a bundle of clothes and puts them on the bed.
She ties on the headscarf and the sash,
Binds her feet with thin white silk satin, and puts on boots.
Fully dressed in an instant,
She holds the mirror in hand to examine herself closely.
Where are the cloud-like chignon and the beautiful feminine face?
There is now only an admirably handsome young man.
A hat embellished with jade and decked with soft wings, and a scholar's scarf;
A white gauze robe and a small bag to hold poetry drafts.
A pair of white ribbons set off refined looks;
In those bachelor's boots, imitating the gait of a man.
Complexion like a peach blossom, fair and rosy;
Eyebrows shapely as willow leaves, long and dark.
A straight sculptured nose and cherry-like mouth;
Blush on the cheeks like rosy clouds, diffusing fragrance.
Demeanor outstanding and absolutely unrivaled;
A handsome appearance truly extraordinary.
A gentle and graceful young lad,
A man with porcelain skin and poetic sensibility.
Such looks may overwhelm beautiful maidens,
And break the hearts of goddesses.
Lijun, after seeing this male look,
Cannot help but admire the image. (3: 10, 287)

Lijun's scrutinizing gaze at herself as a "man" in the mirror reveals the creative involvement of the body in how the readers see what they see. Her cross-dressing passes as convincing, for her handsome appearance is completed with "unrivalled manners" and "poetic sensibility." By putting on the "scholarly scarf and the elegant robe," Lijun transforms herself into a "man" of refined manners. Gazing at her male look in the mirror, Lijun compares herself to other distinguished women cross-dressers. In the Lacanian mirror stage, what is seen is crucially constitutive of the subject's self-identification (Lacan, "The Mirror Stage" 1). The cross-dresser is not merely a spectator or a static participant, but displays a bodily responsiveness accompanying a womanly gaze into the mirror. Mimicking the walk and demeanor of a man, Lijun demonstrates an uncertain sexual identity and transforms her ambivalent self
into a source of desire and anxiety for male and female audiences alike. Despite the 
physical appeal, her image is overridden with anxiety which comes mostly from her 
parents and her betrothed, who want her back, fitting into their domestic paradigm. 
Even Lijun herself is surprised by her flawless "male scholar" look.

Ah, how curious!
How is it that as soon as I change into the male outfit,
I look completely different from my usual self.
With this scholarly scarf and elegant robe I look even more genteel.
Who upon seeing me could doubt that I resemble an immortal?
Even the legendary cross-dressing ladies Liu Qingyun and Xie Xiang'e
Might not have been as handsome as I.
They were truly exceptional women;
Both became immortals and lived in paradise.
Liu Qingyun married a Miss Xiao, west of the Yangzi River, 
and had a happy family.
She became a Top Candidate in the Civil Service Exam
and earned eminence in her career;
A marriage with several wives seemed only a game for her.
Liu Qingyun and her "wives" are all remarried
with Liu's husband Wang Jingxing.
Liu's remarkable adventure was told from generation to generation.
Another lady, Xie Xiang'e, disguised as her own brother,
became a Top Candidate in the Exam
And married a prime minister's daughter, Wang Shuxian.
Since they were both women, in their marriage,
They had true respect and sympathy for each other.
When the truth was revealed, Wang Shuxian was
remarried to Xiang'e's own brother.
Xie and Liu were truly exceptional among all women.
I myself am endowed with talent.
If I am successful in future,
I should follow the example of these ancient precursors.
If I am married to a woman,
I certainly have the most skill in drawing eyebrows for my wife.
Ah, my dear Huangfu!
If I follow the example of Liu Qingyun, 
Could you be Liu's husband Wang Jingxing? (3: 10, 287)

The expression "drawing eyebrows for my wife" is an allusion to a Han offi-
cial, Zhang Chang (張敞, first century BC), who loved his wife very much and
did eyebrow make-up for her every morning before leaving for work. The emperor 
heard of this anecdote and praised them as a couple who truly loved each other. Fac-
ing the mirror, Lijun orchestrates her own objectification and simultaneously seeks 
self-empowerment in spectating and speculating. The image of the protagonist is 
dramatized in the visual narrative underlying the text. The moment witnesses a fu-
sion of viewing positions for Lijun, the narrator, and the targeted textual audience.
Lijun's reflexive gaze on her "male" look in the mirror suggests her will to escape 
the boundaries of women in society. Embarking on an adventurous journey, Lijun
is elated in spirit. "Letting out a breath and raising her chin, she takes on manly manners. / Her behavior is no longer feminine at all" (3: 10, 289). Following her precursors, Lijun performs a subjectivity that lies at the borders of life and legend, truth and fabrication.

Lijun's cross-dressing performance can further be considered with intertextual readings of historical and literary examples of cross-dressed women in late imperial China. These women, by taking on a masculine identity, consciously resisted the normalized understanding of gender and sexuality in the patriarchal society. I will discuss three prominent examples of women's cross-dressing, literary characters Huang Chonggu, Xie Xucai (謝絮才), and playwright Wu Zao (吳藻). After Lijun is appointed prime minister, local officials from a southern county send an opera troupe called 百花班 (baihuaban, Hundred-Flower Troupe) which consists of all women performers, hoping to please the minister with the beautiful opera singers. Lijun chooses a play staging the story of a woman who dresses as a man and becomes the top candidate in the civil service examination. The play alludes to a sixteenth-century popular play 女狀元 (Nüzhuangyuan, The Female Top Candidate) in which the cross-dressed character Huang Chonggu claims, "Who is responsible for good deeds in this world? It's not men; it's the women!" (Xu Wei, Ci Mulan 1766: 224-39).

In the original story of the historical figure Huang Chonggu, Huang cross-dressed from childhood and impressed the minister with her talent in writing poetry. When the minister proposes to marry Huang to his daughter, Huang writes a poem to decline the marriage and confess her true sex, "If my lord wishes to have me as a son-in-law, I wish heaven could change me into a man instantly" (Peng Dingqiu 799: 8995). The allusion to this play in Destiny of Rebirth contributes to an intense scene in which Lijun watches a cross-dressed performer on stage. Lijun, together with the fictional audience, are all involved in the same sympathetic mood: "The scene pleases the viewers' minds with its subtlety; its implications are naturally and spontaneously accessible" (10: 43, 688). This play within a play demonstrates a sympathetic moment when Lijun and the woman performer face each other as actor and spectator. However, it ironically complicates Lijun's role as the spectator and subverted actor off the stage, revealing an engaged dialectic between life and theater, fact and representation, and the unstable, ever-changing space between these assumed polar opposites.

The above scene together with many other instances of theatrical performance in the text suggests the influence of a dramatic tradition dating to the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1279-1368) dynasties. The intertextual references between tanci and theatrical works about women cross-dressers conditioned both the production and the reception of the text among the author's envisaged audience. In late imperial drama, cross-dressers' self-positioning necessarily remained indeterminate, conditioned by their unviable sociocultural status in the context of patriarchy (Hua, Wei, Mingqing xiqu). Lijun's story recalls a play 喬影 (Qiaoying, The Image in Disguise) by the woman poet and playwright Wu Zao (吳藻, 1799-1862). The play consists of a set of song suites in which the protagonist Xie Xucai (謝絮才) cross-dresses and paints a miniature of herself in official's robes. She describes herself as
latter-day literati poet Qu Yuan (屈原, fourth to third century BCE), a loyal minister in the state of Chu, who, slandered, rejected, and exiled, wrote allegorical poems expressing his grievances. Xie expresses her frustration that the conflict between herself and her times prevents her from fully employing her talents. "Alas! Fettered by my physical form, I can only sigh all alone over my sadness. If one considers the matter carefully though, while miraculous transformations depend on Heaven, the initiative rests with oneself. That is why a few days ago I painted a small portrait of myself dressed in male attire" (Wu Zao 132). The protagonist's self-portrait, rather than being conceptualized as an aesthetic representation, is figured to be a shadow, lacking substance, as the title of the play illustrates. This scene of the cross-dressed Xie Xucai painting a portrait of herself as a man is another example that shows the appropriation and transformation of the beauty portrait convention. Xie, who herself is the painter, reinscribes her image as a man. (There are several translations of this play. One version is "Drinking Wine and Reading 'Encountering Sorrow': A Reflection in Disguise by Wu Zao (1799-1862)" by Sophie VoIpp, in Mann and Cheng, Under Confucian Eyes 239-52; see also Idema and Grant, Red Brush 687-93). The play emphatically displays the complexity of transvestite identity, which appears multiplied and deceptive in cross-dressing performance.

Lijun's acts, as critics observe, are given justification by her apparent advocacy of filial piety and chastity, in order to protect her work from censorship and moralistic criticism from mainstream society (see Guo Moruo's comments in Zaishengyuan 14: 54, 546). However, despite this apparent authorial precaution, the progressive initiative in Destiny of Rebirth incurred disparagement from critics, with complaints about "demolishing cardinal human relationships" or "rebelling against primary principles." Lijun, as a "man," challenges the Confucian ethical principles in her relationship with the "ruler, father, and husband," which leads to the author's dilemma in closing the story. When Lijun's real identity is disclosed, the emperor presses her to revert to her feminine appearance and to become his concubine. Lijun claims that she "would rather take the punishment of death than follow this order" (Zaishengyuan 17: 68, 704). Chen's work breaks off at this point, showing Lijun, who has come down with a sudden illness after her identity is exposed, vomiting blood in front of the emperor. The text seems to suggest that death would be a better choice for the cross-dressed Lijun than reversion to a woman's identity. Hu Siao-chen has offered an intriguing analysis of war, violence, and blood in the voluminous tanci work Liuhuameng (Dream of the Pomegranate Flower, 1841), in which the metaphor of blood speaks of women's passion, anguish, or sisterly love (Hu, Siao-chen, "War" 249-83).

Lijun's unconventional actions are first demonstrated in her relationship with her fiancé Huangfu Shaohua. The author replaces the relationship between the couple with a hierarchical relation between teacher and student, with Lijun becoming Shaohua's mentor in his career. As an introductory poem to a chapter goes:

With outstanding talent she rises from the inner chamber,
Taking off her make-up, she passes as a fine scholar.
A top candidate in the Imperial Exam,
A dutiful and loyal Prime Minister in the palace. 
Fame and majesty widely admired by the world, 
Wisdom and ingenuity unrivalled among many. 
A beautiful countenance bewilders disciples like Shaohua, 
Who is uncertain whether the Minister is a woman or a man. (13: 49, 490)

The first two lines draw attention to the interchangeability of gender roles in the late imperial period. Like cross-dressing, applying and taking off make-up is already a gendered performance. Interestingly, before she transforms her appearance into that of a man, the protagonist plays up her identity as a woman by applying make-up. Taking off the make-up is an ironic process of "revealing" the feminine body beneath, which may appear indistinguishable from that of a refined young man. Beneath the robe, the cross-dresser's body presents the mobility of "his" gender identities. Lijun's body is in this way a dynamic text, captivating yet indecipherable to Shaohua, who cannot confirm that the minister is his lost fiancé. This opening poem reflects the author's vigorous struggle with socially prescribed gender categories and her efforts to innovate, to create new positions for women of the time.

Lijun's extraordinary character and achievement explain her rejection of marriage with Shaohua. The opening poem of juan 15 serves as another moment that foreshadows Lijun's ultimate unwillingness to revert to the role of the good wife.

Heaven has it that a person with unique talent will come from the embroidered chambers, 
Young and gentle as she is, she is appointed the Prime Minister of the country. 
Without the least intention to be locked with her fiancé in marriage, 
She cross-dresses to express a desire to achieve, in whatever small way. 
She would never sacrifice her chastity to acquire fortune, 
Relying on her sagacity she stays away from common people's suspicions. 
When her true identity is revealed in the future, 
The phoenix will ascend, hearing the melody of the xiao. (15: 57, 577)

The last line might suggest Lijun's reconciliation with Shaohua, and that both might become immortals in the end. The poem starts as a biography of the protagonist, who is destined to rise from the inner chambers and become the country's prime minister. The author's claim of Lijun's chastity, as the beginning of this section suggests, reflects the authorial concern for legitimizing her writing in the dominant patriarchal culture and may serve as a "cover" for the potentially subversive content in the text. A famous example is 肉蒲圖 (Rouputuan, The Carnal Prayer Mat), an erotic novel written by Li Yū (李漁, 1610-1680). Although the sexual descriptions in the novel are extremely graphic, in the preface the author adopts a didactic tone and claims that his purpose is to warn his readers the danger of carnal pleasure by exposing the harmful outcome of deviant sexual behaviors. Chastity is strategically evoked and stressed to justify Lijun's cross-gender performances. This resonates with the ending lines of the poem, which allude to the legend of chuixiao yinfeng (吹簫引鳳), or "playing the instrument xiao to draw the phoenix," suggesting the possibility
of Lijun marrying Shaohua when she reveals her true self. This expression regarding Lijun's possible reunion with Shaohua and her persistent rejection of marriage develops to a moment when Lijun's identity is exposed. Patricia Sieber suggests that Zaishengyuan "adumbrates the lure of modern forms of female self-determination—unfettered mobility, sexual choice, and professional power. Yet what this story also shows is that the girl had to renounce her female community once she began to pass for a man" (147). However, the gradual development of Lijun's autonomous character in the text contradicts this possibility of the couple's reunion. While the faithful Shaohua willingly risks being scolded by his parents and insists on waiting for Lijun's return, Lijun ridicules Shaohua's obstinacy. Unmoved by the faithful Shaohua, Lijun even scolds her own parents who collaborate with Shaohua to force her into confession. Yet contrary to the images of disobedient women which were often denounced as immoral in didactic books, Chen's Lijun is endowed with such psychological depth that the readers could only sympathize with the ambitious yet ill-fated heroine.

In comparison with the self-portrait scene, the text also depicts a scene of Lijun, now prime minister Li Xiangru, presiding over the civil service exam and reading the candidates' compositions.

In a studio as warm as spring, a fire basin is placed, in which a fire is kept day and night.
She is seated in the chair, a house servant waiting by the desk.
Gallantly dressed in a fur coat, with elegance she wears a soft head covering.
Two candles lit by the window, a scarlet brush held in hand.
One moment, a smile and a circle of a few sentences.
Another, fine eyebrows knit and a few sighs fall.
Suddenly, a pause of the brush for more reading and chanting.
Suddenly, turning of pages and writing corrections and comments.
Writings in brush strokes and refined forms, filled the boxes and trunks, endlessly adding to the pile.
Sometimes she reads out loud and sings a praise,
Sometimes she nods and praises the clarity of writing. She is Annoyed by the maids' urges for dinner.
Pleased to see good writings from the visiting disciples.
. . . a really talented Minister.
Truly young and wise, an honored and prominent official.
Day by day she cannot spare a moment from reading the essays,
And declines all meetings with relatives and students in the capital city.

In a similar setting of the domestic space is Lijun, who now is a married "man" and a prime minister who is fully devoted to "his" official duties. If the previous scenes of Lijun making a self-portrait and inspecting her cross-dressed self demonstrate her physical transformation, this scene of Lijun reading and ranking the exam candidates' essays displays her seamlessly performing a role as mentor of the selected male disciples and executing her intellectual power in evaluating their writing. The transformation of the heroine's inner chamber into a literati's studio demonstrates
women's negotiation and reinvention of their identity in domestic and public spaces. The heroine, by taking on a masculine identity, successfully transforms her literary talent into a source of social power.

As Lijun's story reveals, women's cross-dressing is a form of gender mimicry, in that the subject actively takes part in constructing his or her own image by drawing on seemingly incongruent gender roles. Cross-dressing performance is represented by a transitive subjective position, with the cross-dresser strategically challenging and transforming dominant gender prescriptions. In another seventeenth-century tanci work, Tianyuhua (Heaven Rains Flowers), the heroine Zuo Yizhen, born in an upper-class family, has been educated as if she were a boy, and develops a fascination for her father's "coiling-dragon swords," which can expand and contract at will. She subsequently obtains these swords from her father and uses them first to kill an evil spirit that intrudes into the flower garden of her family, and later to execute the evil usurper Zheng Guotai (鄭國泰) (Idema and Grant, Red Brush 726; also see Epstein, "Patrimonial Bonds" 9). Although Yizhen's yearning for the father's sword may "symbolize her desire to take over the father's position and become a man herself," such a desire is ultimately frustrated. She subsequently marries a literati scholar Zuo Weiming (左維明) and lives a largely domestic life after marriage. In Destiny of Rebirth, however, Meng Lijun takes a more determined break from her feminine identity by cross-dressing. When the disguised Lijun is recognized by her parents, she rationalizes her unwillingness to marry her fiancé and go back to a woman's life. Lijun defends her choice in the name of filial piety, attempting to resist marriage and persuade her parents into keeping her sexual identity a secret. "Why don't you just let me go on and live the life of a man? / . . . Even though I was born a woman, / now I enter the royal palace and serve the Emperor. . . . / What is the need for me to be married? / Even the place of the Empress herself could not fit into my expectations!" (11: 44, 780).

This defiant statement in Destiny of Rebirth invited criticism from tanci authors of the time and in ensuing generations. Hou Zhi, for example, criticized Lijun for her political ambition and rebellious refusal to recognize her parents in public. Hu Siao-chen offers a reading of Hou Zhi's Remaking Heaven, which rewrote Destiny of Rebirth and depicted Lijun as a converted daughter and wife (Cainü 29). Perhaps because she was incapable of balancing the character's personal aspirations with the readers' desire to see Lijun's reunion with her fiancé, Chen Duansheng left the work unfinished. After Chen's death, a tanci writer Liang Desheng (1771-1847) added three volumes to the work. According to Chen Wenshu, Liang Desheng initially took on the writing with her husband and completed the sequel to Destiny of Rebirth together with him. However, authorial statements in the twentieth juan reveal that her husband died in the course of the project. Liang completed the writing alone (Sung 126-27). In the added ending, Lijun returns to the life of a wife in a polygamous family. As in the earlier tanci Jade Bracelets, the cross-dresser marries her betrothed fiancé, together with a sworn sister who had been her "wife" in the mock marriage.
Chen Duansheng's text exemplifies the liberating potential of cross-gender mimicry, a topic that many feminist scholars have theorized and explored. In women's *tanci* fiction, representations of women's same-sex desire frequently occur. These textual scenes either celebrate a spiritual harmony among the cross-dressed heroines and the feminine members in mock unions (some cross-dressers married more than once), or create a melodramatic irony by showing unsuspecting women's infatuation with the beautifully disguised cross-dressers. Women's homoeroticism in *tanci*, poignant or comical, constantly distorts gender boundaries and reveals cross-dressers as empowering characters who actively challenge patriarchal control of women's sexuality.

In Chen's work, when Lijun's bound feet are dramatically revealed, the multivalent identity of the cross-dresser causes a homoerotic tension between the cross-dresser and the unsuspecting women characters who have mistaken Lijun for a man. The theme of women's homoeroticism is crucially related to cross-dressing in many *tanci*, suggesting an alternative possibility of sexuality beyond the heterosexual norm. When the emperor suspects that Lijun (with the pseudonym of Li Mingtang [酈明堂]) is actually a cross-dresser, he schemes with the empress dowager to invite Li/Lijun to the palace and get him drunk. The empress dowager then orders two palace maids to take off Li/Lijun's shoes to see if "he" is a woman with bound feet. The text stages an intriguing scene in which the two maids are overawed by the sleeping minister's ravishing beauty while they muse on his or her sexual identity. The revelation of the bound feet is endlessly delayed. After the boots are taken off, the maids find both feet wrapped in satin socks. Driven by curiosity, they remove the socks and are surprised to see layer after layer of clothes binding the feet.

Giggling in hushed tones,
They take pleasure in looking, while pulling off the wrapping cloth.
They see that the cloth on his feet seems endlessly long,
Almost a *zhang* of white satin is scattered on the couch.
After six or seven rounds, the shape of her refined shoes appears,
pleasing as the newly sprung bamboo roots.
Yet another layer removed, a pair of scarlet shoes is seen,
red as dewy lotus flowers.
After all the white satin is taken off,
The two maidens are thrilled by the sight.
When the satin foot binding cloth runs to the end,
The scarlet embroidered shoes are revealed.
The upper is sewn with interlocked golden threads and pale blue trimmings.
The toes of the shoes are adorned with clusters of pearls secured with minute stitches.
Free of stains and dust,
These shoes are barely three inches long;
The feet must be even smaller, because of the two shoes.
The maids, upon seeing this,
Cannot help beaming with joy. (16: 64, 1082)

The minister's feet are not fully revealed yet. The maids, surprised at the small size of Lijun's feet, remove the red shoes, and find another pair of sleeping shoes
inside. In the cult of bound feet, the smallest ones are the more admirable. The narrator's jovial description of the scene stages the pleasure of the women spectators both in and out of the text. At the end, Lijun's feet are still wrapped in a pair of embroidered shoes, hidden from the sight of the audience. Possibly Chen makes such an arrangement so that Lijun will not lose face by having her body revealed in public. Although the bound feet are representative of traditional feminine beauty, they are always covered with embroidered shoes. The feet, deformed and mutilated, are considered unsightly and never revealed in public. Zeitlin notes that "bound feet, those man-made fetishes that had become the locus of the erotic imagination in late imperial China, are transformed into a natural and immutable proof of true femininity" (Zeitlin, Historian of the Strange 116). Lijun's bound feet trigger even more complex spectatorship as it is the women who are feasting on the sight of the lotus feet with desiring gazes. The text resists the exposure of its heroine's body, offering instead an opacity that blocks the gaze of both the reader and the palace maids. The "absence" of Lijun's feet figuratively suggests that there are no authentic original identities in transgender performances. The narrative creates a "scenographic space" of women's same-sex desire. Maaike Bleeker suggests that "scenographic space" refers to a theatrical space in which all that is seen is in a sense staged for a viewer (98). This quasi-theatrical episode is fraught with homoeroticism, with the women readers invited to share with the royal maids the pleasure of looking at Lijun's concealed feet. This unconventional visual structure of multiple women viewers gazing at a woman transforms the Freudian heterosexual model of fetishism, and submits the cross-dressed protagonist to an intensely homoerotic gaze from the audience. Intriguingly, in Destiny of Rebirth, Chen did not continue the narrative beyond the point at which Lijun is confronted with the emperor's proposal of marriage. Chen thus leaves the text and the protagonist Lijun in a tale of deferral, indicating the very impossibility of relegating the cross-dresser to a distinctively feminine subjectivity.

The maids' desirous gazes toward Lijun's bound feet also exhibit women's scopophilia. This desiring look possibly represents the maids' autoerotic appreciation of the ideal female body, which is then transferred toward the disguised ministers' perfectly shaped feet. The above scene constitutes another scenario of the mirror stage, in which the minister's fetishized feet represent a reflected body of the ideal ego for the maids, who are the bearers of the gaze. The feet constitute "the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition" (Mulvey, 836). Women's pleasure in looking at the bound feet, perverse as it may be, should be taken as a way for them to separate from their constrained life in the inner compound and play with their voyeuristic fantasy.

Chen Duansheng might have anticipated this crisis of Lijun's true identity being exposed as she wrote the first half of the book. Earlier in the book Chen depicts cross-dressed military leader Wei Yong'e, who was formerly the wife of a rebellious soldier in a troop that took shelter in the mountains. After her husband's death, Wei took the leadership of the group. When the Huangfu family was wrongly accused of treason and sent to the capital city in prisoners' cages, Wei led her troop and besieged
the group, and subsequently saved Zhanghua and her mother. In the end Wei, following the suggestion of the Huangfus, surrendered to the emperor. When the emperor attempted to marry Wei to Zhanghua, Wei had to confess her true identity to the emperor and begged for his forgiveness. The emperor was deeply impressed by Wei's heroic deeds and her capability to maintain chastity while commanding a large military troop. He immediately pardoned Wei and praised her for keeping her chastity to her husband and for fulfilling her duty to the emperor by surrendering her military force to the government (8: 537-38). However, the text indicates, through Zhanghua's internal monologue, that the emperor might have the thought of taking Wei as one of his concubines. This episode foreshadows the conflict between Lijun's personal aspiration and the emperor's voracious domination when Lijun's true identity is found out. He insists on taking Lijun and Lijun's wife Liang Suhua both as his wives, trying to persuade Lijun that "as a woman, you should enjoy the prime prestige in taking such a husband" (17: 1127). As the emperor's preying character is gradually unraveled, Lijun is left with no choice of her own.

The narrative voice in Destiny of Rebirth is a distinctively feminine and semi-autobiographical voice. This autobiographical narrative impulse is not unique to the genre of tanci and can be found often in late imperial women's literature. In Ming and Qing women's poetry, the autobiographical poem is a subgenre which took its resources from folk poetry in feminine voices and from the poetry of the inner life. Since late Ming, women authors, through their self-representation in poetry prefaces, demonstrate evidences of their desire to become legitimate participants in literary culture (Robertson, "Changing the Subject" 182). The autobiographical insertions in Destiny of Rebirth resonate with these historical contexts, and demonstrate an authorial voice speaking to a community of women readers, drawing emotive support from them and evoking their sympathetic readings (Zhao 244-54). Grace S. Fong points out that by the Qing, educated gentry women had utilized poetry as a discursive field and a multifaceted process by means of which they were able to imagine themselves and one another as belonging to a group, defined by their ability to write, that transcended the normative limits of kinship and social systems (Fong, Herself an Author 144). Fong explores how this sense of belonging can be seen as expressed symbolically in the term "mingyuan" (notable women), used by women and men in the titles of anthologies of women's poetry (Berg, Women Writers 135).

At the beginning the narrator assumes an extradiegetic position,

Looking through the lens of the marriage imperative:
As an ancient saying goes,
"Marriage is ordained five hundred years before the fact."
I believe that
Success and failure in love are both fated.
Often a handsome horse is ridden by an uncouth villager;
A clever wife commonly rests at the side of an imprudent husband.
One should believe that such incidents are the doing of
The karma of predestination, and are by no means accidental. (1: 1, 2)
The text displays a dialectic between a drive toward closure (a happy marriage) and the delay of that closure (the frustrated love relations in characters' past lives). The following lines, though, reveal a proleptic shift from the ancient tales to events that will take place in the characters' present lives.

If once upon a time,
A scholar marries a beautiful lady,
It is mostly because of their destined bond in their last lives.
If a couple has no luck to achieve a desired relationship
in their latest lives,
They are connected through karmic bonds in this life.
If they are not particular about their partners' looks,
They will be able to resume their love bond with each other.

. . .
Why do I bring up the issue of predestination here?
Because it is
A vital matter in this story.
Here I will tell
An unusual tale of grief and joy, of separation and reunion,
Titled Destiny of Rebirth;
It is a quite unconventional story. (1: 1, 2)

The theme of predestination, which Chen brings up in her authorial assertions, is a narrative convention in the traditional caizi jiaren (才子佳人) fiction, or scholar and beauty novels, which became popular in the southern regions during the late Ming period (see Hu, Wanchuan 1994). This kind of fiction, which focuses on themes of marriage and love, also depicts women characters that are both beautiful and endowed with exceptional talents and independence. Chen Duansheng's tale, likewise, starts with an anticipation of the consummation of Lijun and Shaohua's love. This foreshadowing, nevertheless, does not lead to a corresponding closure, when the author would typically gradually unveil the discrepancy between Lijun's character and her predestined marriage. Lijun's destiny departs from the precursory tale of love and reunion. By disguising herself as a man, she already eludes the feminine body and resumes a new life after cross-dressing. The title word "rebirth" therefore indicates the cross-dresser's acquisition of a new life beyond gender boundaries or karmic circumstances. The concept "karma" in this context refers to the fact that star-dwelling immortals, for a reason, must live out a human life on earth.

The author's impulse for self-empowerment becomes most prominent in volume 17, where Chen contemplates the correlation between her life as a writer and possible endings for the story. After her family calamity, Chen lamented on the hardship of life and recalls her days before marriage:

I scratch my head and call out to Heaven, wishing to ask,
"Can the Way of Heaven be turned around?"
Having tasted to the full all the bitter sufferings of the world,
I recall the days of my earliest youth in the inner chambers:
We sisters shared a couch as we listened to the night rain,
And our parents assigned us rhymes and taught us poetry . . .
In my ignorance I dared steal a glance at the affairs of the past.
With brush in hand, I wrote Destiny of Rebirth. (17: 65, 1084)

The first line alludes to the poem "天問" ("Tianwen," "Questions to Heaven") in
楚辭 (Chuci, Songs of Chu), a monumental work representing the beginning of an or...

As it happens, my book has enjoyed a reputation for a time,
And has found its way throughout the province of Zhejiang.
My friends in the inner chambers have often voiced their admiration. . . .
My elders in their screened halls have all let themselves be amused.
They've buzzed about my ears, urging me to complete the book,
as they all longed to see
The star-crossed lovers, that perfect couple, brought together at last. "Huangfu Shaohua must be matched with his beautiful bride, Minister Li must finally consummate her marriage! As you have played the role of match maker on their behalf, You should not play the Son of Heaven and keep them apart!" The Creator should not blame me for this state of affairs; I am only a woman with a broken heart grieving over her lonely life . . . All the endless affairs of the last twelve years Have passed in a tipsy dream of Li Mingtang! (17: 65, 1085)

This textual moment demonstrates the notable embeddedness of the protagonist, the author, and her envisaged readers in the inner chambers: that is, all three are at a vantage point to anticipate and recollect, becoming both the objects and the subjects of the narrative. Presenting a replica of the text within the text itself, Chen Duansheng concludes the *tanci* with a reflection of the past and the present, revealing the author's own unviable position as a textual subject and a woman author in real life (for Chen's feminine consciousness as an author, see Yue, Daiyun). Simultaneously, Chen's twelve years of writing is internally replicated in Lijun's dream, revealing a self-producing desire in the text that circulates between the author, the text, and her projected audience (see Zou, Ying, "Time Experience" 113-24). Chen's powerfully present authorial voice seeks to reclaim her self from silence, and articulates a woman author's conscious resistance of dominant modes of gender representation.

Cross-dressing, to conclude, brings out the heroine's power to negotiate and resist Confucian ethical codes, which prescribe women's subordinate relationship to men in the inner quarters and within the public sphere. The author's maneuver of these textual scenarios reveals a strategic negotiation between the social and cultural discourses on feminine chastity and filial piety on the one hand, and women's private desires to pursue autonomy and freedom beyond these regulations on the other. Destiny of Rebirth brings to the surface a feminine consciousness that challenges the dominant prescriptions of women's gender roles and reveals the author's emancipatory vision along with its unresolved problems. As Maureen Robertson suggests, in the study of late imperial women's extant writing as an art, it is important to give attention to the "writerly" character of this body of texts and its voices, which are specifically literary mediations of women's consciousness (Robertson, "Literary Authorship" 379). Chen's *Zaishengyuan* elucidates the author's conflicts and dilemmas about writing that were shared by other women authors in the Chinese patriarchal context. The most compelling textual evidence that reveals the narrative impasse is the sight of Lijun's bound feet, which proves her social identity as a woman and her internalization of such social prescriptions of her gendered identity. The author's predicament in her real life echoes the heroine's implied death in the end, as the ailing Lijun spits blood when pressed by the emperor's proposal, knowing that she would surely be executed if she rejected it. The open-endedness of the book suggests that Chen's vision of freedom, resembling Lijun's pursuit of freedom, could only find its fulfillment in the next life.