Women’s Tanci Fiction in Late Imperial and Early Twentieth-Century China

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Chapter Two

Disguised Scholar, Fox Spirit, and Moralism in *Bishenghua* (Blossom from the Brush)

Chen Duansheng's *Zaishengyuan* (Destiny of Rebirth) leaves a lingering question: What would happen if the heroine were forced to return to the boudoir when her identity was disclosed? Among Chen's later peers, *tanci* author Liang Desheng (1771-1847) wrote an additional forty chapters of Chen's *tanci* in which Lijun compromises with the emperor and marries Shaohua. Later, Hou Zhi (1829-1764) refashioned Chen's *tanci* for readers by editing the text for reprint and composing a *tanci* work, *Zaizaotian* (Remaking Heaven), which is a sequel to *Zaishengyuan*. In *Zaizaotian*, Hou depicts the heroine Huangfu Feilong, the younger daughter of Meng Lijun. These ensuing narratives have revised Chen's work by recycling, modifying, and expanding its original narrative frame and plot elements. Whereas Liang and Hou both retold Chen's *tanci* by extending the original plot line, nineteenth-century author Qiu Xinru composed a new *tanci* about a cross-dressed heroine to remedy Lijun's moral imperfections (for a comparison of Qiu's and Hou's rewriting of *Zaishengyuan*, see Wu, Qingyun 9). In *Bishenghua* (Blossom from the Brush), the heroine Jiang Dehua is selected as one of the royal maidens to go to the palace. Formally engaged to a gallant young man, Wen Shaoxia (文少霞), she attempts suicide after being captured and sent to the capital. A benevolent fox spirit comes to her rescue, helping her to dress as a man in order to flee from the calamity. Later the disguised Dehua excels in the civil service exam and becomes a prime minister. When her identity is disclosed, she marries her fiancé Wen Shaoxia and retreats to the boudoir. Through conciliation with social pressure and changing back to her feminine identity, Dehua gains greater authority in the inner chambers, while continuing to enjoy the favor of the court. The text's portrayals of the fox spirit and women's aspirations for Daoist transcendentalism are an imaginative approach to obtaining spiritual agency. Qiu's authorial representation of her self-image creates an opportunity for enacting subjectivity from a gendered viewpoint and enables her to tell a personal history along with her extraordinary tale.
This chapter studies how *Bishenghua* emerges as an exceptional *tanci* after *Zaishengyuan*, by reworking the cross-dressing plot and rectifying the embedded moral values following the orthodox social and cultural values of the time. Whereas Qiu succeeds in reviving the tale of the cross-dressed heroine by imagining the life of Dehua after she reverts back to her feminine identity, the author's seemingly realistic depiction of the outcome exposes Qiu's own moral and ethical constraints in writing and her prescribed position as the moral instructress of her readers. As if to counterbalance this didactic tendency, Qiu resorts to supernatural narrative elements, including fox spirits and female immortals, to deliver imagined possibilities of women exerting new forms of subjectivity beyond the ethereal yokes. However, Qiu's narratives of the fantastic and the marvelous, like previous *tanci* tales, are also structured by Confucian moral ethics of filial piety and feminine virtue. The text's self-acclaimed feminine authorship, its dramatic representation of a diverse range of exceptional heroines, and the persistent quest for an alternatively conceived, morally upright feminine subjectivity all attest to Qiu's mastery of the aesthetical ramifications of *tanci* and to her reputable presence on a broader, ethical horizon of writing.

*Bishenghua* is set in the Ming Zhengde (正德) period (1506-21). The heroine Jiang Dehua is the daughter of a high-ranking official, Jiang Jinren. At her birth her mother, Mo Shi, dreams of a goddess who holds a colorful writing brush and a piece of brocade embroidered with palindromic poems. Because the goddess must make amends for improprieties she committed in heaven, she tells Mo Shi that she will be born as her mortal daughter. This textual detail foreshadows Dehua's exceptional talent. Later Dehua grows into a beautiful young woman who has learned literature and history through family education. She becomes engaged to Wen Shaoxia, a gallant and talented young man and the second son of an official, Wen Shanglin (文上林). However, Wen Shaoxia catches the eye of the despotic Chu Yuanfang (楚元方), whose daughter is the emperor's favorite concubine. Using his royal connection, Chu wants to force Shaoxia into marrying his daughter Chu Chunyi (楚春漪). The Wen family has a strong aversion to the tyrannous Chu and turns down his proposal. The conflict between the two families grows grave when Shaoxia's beautiful sister Wen Peilan (文佩蘭) also declines to marry Chu's son Chun Tinghui (楚廷輝) and is engaged to another scholar, Xie Chunrong (謝春溶). The revengeful Tinghui then abducts Peilan on her wedding day. Peilan attempts to drown herself but is rescued by a governor, Wang Shouren (王守仁), who adopts her as his daughter. Determined to destroy Shaoxia and Dehua's engagement, Chu Yuanfang recommends Dehua as a candidate when the emperor carries out a national selection of royal maidens. Dehua is captured and taken to the capital with other selected girls. When she attempts to hang herself in order to keep her chastity, a sympathetic fox spirit, Hu Yuexian (胡月仙), rescues her. The spirit, after helping her to cross-dress as a man and escape, goes to the palace in her place.

Later Dehua, using the name Jiang Junbi in her male identity, succeeds in the civil service exam and is appointed prime minister. Dedicated to her position, she gains distinction through achievements in defending the country and governing...
national affairs. She marries Xie Yunxian (謝韻仙), a minister's daughter who happens to be devoted to Daoist study and declines sexual intimacy. The disguised Junbi, intending to keep her cross-dressing secret, happily agrees to Yunxian's abstinence. Dehua's abandoned fiancé, Shaoxia, upset by the fact that Dehua has entered the palace, leaves the Jiang house where he has resided as a future son-in-law. On an excursion he passes by the house of his aunt, who loves Shaoxia's talent and marries her daughter Murong Chunniang (慕容純娘) to him. Shaoxia then leaves to attend the civil service exam. During his absence, the young bride Chunniang has the misfortune to be abducted and sold into Yunxia's house. Sympathetic to her adversity, the fox spirit Hu Yunxian persuades Jiang Junbi (姜峻璧, the disguised Dehua) into taking Chunniang as a concubine. It happens that Chunniang was pregnant with Shaoxia's child before she was abducted. She gives birth to a son, Xialang (霞郎), who is mistaken as Junbi's own child. Now with a son of "his" own, Junbi lives under the guise of a harmonious family with two "wives." The three decide to devote to Daoist pursuits after accomplishing their filial tasks of serving their parents.

After Shaoxia succeeds in the exam, he confesses to the emperor about his previous engagement. When he encounters the prime minister Jiang Junbi, he suspects Junbi of being his cross-dressed fiancée. After his tests of Junbi are frustrated, Shaoxia manages to make Dehua's father confirm Dehua's disguise. When the secret is revealed, the emperor is so amazed at Dehua's heroism that he awards her the title of the Marquis of Heroism and Chastity. He commands Shaoxia to live in Dehua's maternal household after their marriage and that their children will carry the maternal surname Jiang, inheriting their mother's title. When Dehua resigns from service to the emperor and withdraws to the boudoir, Shaoxia takes on the minister's position in her place. The second half of the tanci illustrates how Dehua deploys her ingenuity in restoring domestic harmony and pacifying family conflicts. She persuades her husband to take on three concubines to give birth to more children, helps her brother-in-law tame his ravenous wife, and even fasts for a year to fulfill a prayer that heaven will give her aged father a son to extend her family bloodline. After organizing donations for people who suffered in a flood in Shandong, the emperor grants her the title Wulin zhongxiao duanhui gongzhu (武林忠孝端惠公主), that is, Warring Affairs Princess of Loyalty, Filial Piety, Grace, and Benevolence, suggesting the transformation of her role into a daughter of the imperial court. This ingenious reconfiguration of Dehua's relation to the emperor exempts her from falling prey to the emperor's domineering sexual desire, as did Lijun in Zaishengyuan. Dehua and Shaoxia give birth to a daughter and a son; both are well-educated and are happily married. After assisting Emperor Jiajing to put down a court rebellion and exterminate corrupting forces, the couple returns to the idyllic West Lake to practice Daoism and become immortals. The ending emphasizes earthly retribution, causal outcome, and the moral values of loyalty and filial love.

If Chen Duansheng's Zaishengyuan leaves Lijun's fate unsettled, Qiu's Bishenghua continues the tale of the cross-dressing woman after she takes off her disguise and makes tactical compromises with social reality, such as encouraging and
even scheming to help her husband and her father take concubines to obtain more offspring, yielding political power to her husband, regulating the inner chambers by taming the shrews, resolving the disputes between the wives and the concubines and their respective broods, and securing the bloodline by arranging marriages. As a reward for these practical conciliations, Dehua enjoys social privilege and a degree of matriarchal power at home, with her husband making concessions regarding domestic affairs when she demands them. After she takes off her disguise, Dehua is endowed with a series of imperial noble titles that acknowledge her traditional virtues, which, like her physical disguise before, cloak her ambitions and personal pursuits in the name of loyalty and chastity.

The characters' names in Qiu's tanci are emblematic of moral implications or thematic associations, as scholar Chen Wenxuan suggests (175). The heroine's surname Jiang is one of the eight main prehistoric surnames in the matriarchal society. The author's surname Qiu originates from the ancient Jiang Taigong (姜太公), who was the prime minister of the Qi State. Because Jiang resided in the county of Yingqiu (營丘) in Shandong province, his descendants took the surname Qiu (丘) which evolved into the surname Qiu (邱) as in the author's surname. This association between the heroine and the author's surname suggests the possibility of Qiu projecting her personal ideal onto the cross-dressed Jiang Dehua. Another character, Xie Xucai, takes her name from the cross-dressed poet Xie Xucai in the play Qiaoying (The Image in Disguise) by eighteenth-century female writer Wu Zao. Wen Peilan takes her given name from the famous Qing poet Xi Peilan (席佩蘭), renowned among the female disciples of Sui Garden under the mentorship of poet Yuan Mei. These allusions to the names of women scholars lend the characters an aura of distinguished learning. Likewise, Qiu gives her antiheroes and antiheroines satiric, ironic, or oxymoronic names. The name of Shaoxia's ravenous concubine Wo Lianggui (沃良規) puns on "without good discipline," indicating her immoral and rapacious personality.

Zaishengyuan serves as an important pretext for Qiu's conception of her tale. Toyoko Yoshida Chen, in her pioneering scholarship on Qiu's work, proposes that Qiu borrowed characters and plots from other tanci such as Yuchuanyuan (Jade Bracelets) and Tianyuhua (Heaven Rains Flowers), both of which have anonymous authorship, and prose fiction such as 紅樓夢 (Hongloumeng, The Dream of the Red Chamber) by Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹) and 萬花樓 (Wanhualou, Tower of Ten Thousand Flowers) by Li Yutang (李雨堂) (Chen, Toyoko Yoshida). The text of Bishenghua consists of four juan and thirty-two hui, in total nine hundred sixty thousand words. The author Qiu Xinru (about 1805-after 1873) was born in Shanyang (山陽), Jiangsu in the Qing Jiaqing period (1799-1820) (Tan, Zhongguo nüxing 438). Sheng Zhimei estimates that Qiu started writing her lengthy tanci in 1813 and finished the work roughly in 1843. A printed version was published as a woodblock edition in 1857, according to the preface by Chen Tongxun (陳同勋). The earliest retrieved text was a headscarf box edition published by Shanghai Shenbaoguan in 1879, which is currently held at Shanghai Normal University Library. Other editions
include a lead-type print edition in 1884 at Nanjing City Library and a lithography edition by Shanjing Xiuai Shanfang in 1894 (Sheng 285).

Since the early twentieth century, critics have probed into Qiu's family background, hoping to gather more information about the author and her family. Ding Zhi'An's research on Qiu's biographical information is particularly informative (Ding, "Bishenghua" 299-300). Based on an interview with Qiu's great grandson and including related studies, Ding's study confirms that Qiu's father was the scholar Qiu Guangye (邱廣業, 1771-1834), her mother Qin Shi (秦氏), and her maternal grandfather Qin Ao (秦鏊) (see Ropp 132). According to the gazetteer of Huai'An (淮安) County, Qiu Guangye earned a provincial academic degree of juren (舉人) in 1808. He was upright in conduct, loyal to his friends, and looked down upon monetary benefits. In 1827, he was appointed an official in Fengyang City and a 勉導 (xundao, instructor) in Linhuai (臨淮). Qiu Guangye composed a poetry collection 臨雲居詩草 (Linyunju shicao, Selected Poems of the Cloud Approaching Lodge). Qiu Xinru's two elder brothers both wrote poems as well (Gao vol. 38; Zhou and Duan vol. 13). Qiu's indebtedness to her illustrious family tradition may be traced in numerous passages of self-reflection in the text. Before her marriage she took to literature and poetry under the encouragement of her mother, when she composed the first five hui of Bishenghua. With the encouragement of her parents, she was able to pursue learning passionately. Qiu states in the introductory lines of a chapter: "Not aware of the ways of the world and the taste of hardship, / I only enjoy my born affinity with literature. / I loved to read my father's books and scan through ancient histories, / and followed my mother's instruction to take an interest in leisure writings. / Most books I read are writings by women on matters in the boudoir, / though I also have appreciated beautiful lines in poetry tradition" (1: 1, 1). The books that were accessible for her reading, as the above passage reveals, might have been carefully selected and contained literature, history, and didactic conduct books for women. Later she reflects on her parents' instructions, which emphasize virtue, caution, and self-restraint.

My father taught me Domestic Regulations, literature, and classics; my mother urged me to commit to women's work and to be frugal and diligent. They instructed me that men should abstain from misusing a sharp tongue to overturn a country, that women should not resort to clever sayings to disrupt feminine virtue. Thus I was made to ponder my word choice all the time as if I could not speak, to mull over every matter time and again, afraid of committing a mistake. In ordinary days, I took to solitude, doing needlework and submitting myself to silence. Stealing a spare moment, I played with my writing brush and was rather contented. (2: 8, 327)

The above passage carries a melancholy tone when the author laments her fear of speaking and using writing as a way of articulating her inner thoughts. Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee argues that female literacy and engagement with reading and writing implicitly challenged orthodox principles regarding gender roles and invited debates
on the "compatibility of female literacy and female virtue" during the Ming and Qing periods (Rosenlee 108). The traditional view holds that the true calling of a virtuous woman rested primarily on her self-sacrifice and fidelity to patrilineage rather than on her personal needs to explore literary talent (Rosenlee 110). The above section of the text well presents Qiu's dilemma of self-positioning between developing female talent and upholding traditional virtue. Her extraordinary discretion about feminine virtue and her respect for her scholarly family lineage, in addition to the heavy duties of daily housework, possibly slowed her writing process. Qiu states that she took nearly three decades to write this *tanci*, including her first stage of writing before marriage covering the first five *hui*, the nineteen-year pause after her marriage, and the later years of composing the remaining twenty-seven *hui*. The preface for the *tanci* by her niece Chen Dongxun shows that the book was printed in 1857. Tracing her life trajectory, critic Tan Zhengbi proposes that Qiu might have started writing between 1821 and 1829, and finished the writing between 1851 and 1857. A later note dedicated to *Bishenghua* by a woman Tanghu yunyu nüshi (棠湖雲腴女士) reveals that by 1873 Qiu was still teaching disciples and struggling against poverty (Tan, Zhongguo nüxing 448-50).

The unusual gap between Qui's writing before and after marriage is attested to in her self-descriptions in the *tanci*. According to the authorial insertions, Qiu was married into a humble Zhang household and led a life of hardships. Although her mother-in-law and husband treated her well, her brothers-in-law and their wives remained distant and expressed jealousy and antipathy against her. Among her three children, the eldest daughter died of small pox; the younger daughter was married. Qiu was left with a son of her own with ordinary intelligence. Her life after marriage was overshadowed by a series of misfortunes including her father's death, her sister's widowhood, her elder brother's death, and the destitute condition of her widowed mother. Because of poverty, Qiu returned to her maternal family, opened a private school, and spent her time teaching, writing, and caring for her mother (Tan and Tan, *Tanci xulu* 252).

The textual reflections of her parents as a source of spiritual comfort and academic support mirror Qiu's journey from girlhood to marriage and her return to her mother's house. Ellen Widmer states that it was not unusual for talented women of the late imperial period to have strong emotional and intellectual support from their mothers, including the famous Ye sisters of Suzhou, whose mother was the poet Shen Yixiu, and the poet Wang Duan (汪端), who received continued support from *tanci* author Liang Desheng (Widmer, *Beauty* 114). Though no direct records of Qiu's mother are found outside the text, Qiu's writing illustrates a strong bond with her mother's family; she also was a very loving mother to her own daughters.

The book title *Bishenghua* comes from a historical anecdote about the medieval Chinese poet Li Bai (李白). In his youth Li dreamed that a flower blossomed from the tip of his writing brush. Later he composed numerous brilliant poems and was known under heaven for his exceptional talent (Wang, Renyu 38). This allusion is appropriated in Qiu's *tanci* to depict the heroine's birth, comparing the talented Dehua
to the male poet Li Bai and foreshadowing Dehua's unusual achievement beyond the inner chambers. According to a preface dated 1857, composed by Chen Tongxun, a son of the author's maternal cousin, the earliest edition, Illustrated Blossom from the tanci, was published in 1857. Chen affirms the literary value and instructive function of Qiu's tanci: "The circulation of this work in the inner chambers will instruct others' sons and daughters . . . The book boasts an extraordinary talent equivalent to that of the ancient female historian Ban Jieyu and rivals the achievement of the classic text Admonishment for Women" (Chen, Tongxun, Preface, Bishenghua 1). Comparing Bishenghua to the didactic text of Admonishment for Women, Chen endows Qiu's tanci with a moral legitimacy and hopes her tanci will be viewed with a similar authority.

Chen continues his praise, saying that Qiu's work aspires to the lofty goal of "endorsing loyalty and upholding filial love, stimulating moral justice and advocating benevolence" (Qiu, Bishenghua 1). It succeeds in achieving fictional verisimilitude by creating the "life-like tones of the characters, and making their appearances and attitudes closely akin to real people" (Qiu, Bishenghua 1). To affirm Qiu's contribution to the tanci tradition, Chen comments that Qiu's achievements are comparable to famous tanci authors and editor Hou Zhi and her peers, and deserve shared ground in history. This comment shows that tanci had exerted an impact on women and some men, thanks to the development of the printing industry and women's contact with publishing firms. Chen continues to recount the heroine Dehua's accomplishments in eliminating the evil and rescuing the loyal, defending the nation and instructing the emperor. He praises her superb skills in mediating between the wives and concubines, reducing their rivalry and ensuring domestic harmony. Considering the virtuous and modest Dehua a mirror to Qiu herself, Chen notes, "My aunt's nature is one of the most filial. She relies on the brush and ink to please her parents, instead of taking pride in and boasting of her talent." Hence Chen reminds the readers "not to view this work as an ordinary tanci" (Qiu, Bishenghua 2).

If Chen's preface represents a male-oriented view of Qiu's work as continuing a tradition of women's tanci, a note dated 1872 in a later reprint of the tanci situates Qiu's work in the broader historical context of women's writing. The female author of the note, Tanghu Yuyu Nüshi, praises Qiu's achievement, writing that "her learning inherits that of the legendary Lady Wei Shuo" and that "her teaching follows the ways of the female master Xuanwen Jun" (Qiu, Bishenghua 1). She continues to praise Qiu's aesthetic achievements and experimental endeavors. "Following the precedent forms of old writings, her tanci produces new forms and structure. With an intention pure and innocent, her writing does not need to avoid depictions of intimate feelings; the events accounted are originally not from the classics, and thus are no more than anecdotes to be shared over wine or tea time" (Qiu, Bishenghua 1). As is often stated, the note classifies Qiu's writing as a product of leisure time and denies on Qiu's behalf any ambition to rival the classics. This ostensible paradox between the endorsement of Qiu's talent and underrepresentation of her authorial prestige suggests women's potent anxiety about self-positioning in a predominantly male cultural and intellectual environment.
The above discussions raise questions about the paratexts of Qiu’s work, just as prefaces and author’s inserted biographical reflections raise questions about Qiu’s authorial intentions and the reception and criticism of her *tanci*. Does Qiu present a story that allows itself to be more meaningfully placed in a female historical context, or is the contextualization by later male and female critics and readers a necessary intervention? How do readers of today understand and access women authors’ anxieties about learning and their self-fashioning in writing? In *tanci*, authorial self-fashioning is centrally reflected in authorial insertions about their lives, feelings, and writing practices at the beginning and ending of each *hui* (chapter). Qiu’s authorial persona grapples with the textual space to articulate her emotions and sentiments in the inner chambers. Hu Siao-chen argues that prominent *tanci* including *Yuchuanyuan* (Jade Bracelets), *Zaishengyuan* (Destiny of Rebirth), *Zaizaotian* (Remaking Heaven), and *Bishenghua* (Blossom from the Brush) collectively mark the establishment of a feminine narrative tradition and characterize key features of talented women’s reading and writing activities (Hu, *Cainü* 50). In *Bishenghua*, the authorial statements are exuberant, consisting of the following levels of self-representation: 1) Qiu Xinru’s personal reflections on private feelings, family, and life events; 2) metanarrative reflections and examinations on the process and discourse of writing; and 3) authorial comment on characters’ individual fates, often carrying an admonishing tone. Women authors’ self-dramatization and verisimilitude projected in the biographical illustrations distinguish *tanci* from other late imperial vernacular genres as a personal and feminine narrative. The authorial insertions depict the poetic persona of a feminine subjectivity and assist the readers to imagine the author’s presence with vivid details.

This dramatized authorial self constantly reflects on the ironic incompatibility of the fictional world and women’s real lives. The beautiful tale that comes to full blossom under the writer’s brush is nothing other than illusion, suggesting the author’s irresolute position between realistic mimesis and self-generating meaning. Also, the didactic aspect of the authorial comments, usually at the end of a *hui* (chapter), depicts an authorial self who imparts moral messages to the readers or instructs the readers to follow moral principles, manifesting the impact of conduct literature on women’s gender roles. The author, by adopting such a moralizing voice, obtains a form of ethical authority and claims an instructive intention far beyond the themes of private concerns and sentiments of loving couples, which are frequently found in less refined *tanci* romances. Aiming to establish a new *tanci* from the conventions, Qiu takes an ethical turn by substituting traditional formulas with a morally driven plot arrangement and characterization.

This self-admonishing authorial narrator, however, is far from a neutral presence without emotional involvement. In a tone of self-mockery and regret, she laments,

Even though I have seen through the cause and outcome in my fate,
I am after all not a wooden puppet without senses.
Ill fated, I mock my birth into such a world,
with an interest in literature it only burdens my heart.
. . . I pity my daughter who is pleading for a livelihood from others and sigh for my brother who travels afar and has not returned.
Half of my life I have worked diligently in vain,
for the rest of my life I regret and feel ashamed for my mother's instruction.
Though my nature inclines toward solitude, my sentiments are originally joyful,
for daily expenses I have almost exhausted my means. (8: 29, 1328)

Reflecting the "events in her floating life" and "the sentiments and desires in the book," the author feels time-fastened by her writing process. She finds herself a distanced voyeur of changing nature, "Just witness the cuckoo bird chanting to death, spitting up blood; / suddenly perceive the migrating wild goose crossing the blue sky" (Qiu 1328). Reminiscent of Chen Duansheng's self-dramatizing narrator, Bishenghua (Blossom from the Brush) presents an embodied narrator "whose motivation for writing is existential," for writing is "directly connected with her practical experiences, with the joys and sorrows she has experienced, with her moods and needs" (Stanzel 93). The extensive self-portrayal of these embodied narrators in Destiny of Rebirth, Blossom from the Brush, and the later Mengyingyuan (Dream, Image, Destiny; preface dated 1843) by Zheng Danruo depicts a distinctive feminine authorial presence, and situates tanci fiction as a woman-oriented narrative form. That is to say, such autobiographical narrators, basing their reflections on women's writing experience, reach out to women readers in the inner chambers, and cultivate an author-reader relationship that is derived from women's experiences and reciprocally produces a form of feminine friendship between the author and her selected readers.

In Qiu's tanci, the authorial self-narrations engage the readers in a fictional universe in which the author's personal life experience, feelings, aspirations, and challenges in writing build on the text's narrative reliability and activate the readers' sympathetic understanding of human vice and worth. A representative passage that reflects Qiu's review of her life is at the beginning of the sixth hui. In comparison with the first five hui, which were composed before her marriage and carry a joyful tone, the following part of the novel was composed roughly nineteen years later when the author had suffered a series of misfortunes and was under economic strain. She laments,

To this day, I have lived an immiserated life and struggled in vain.
Only to find myself and my husband dressed in coarse coverings, weeping and sighing.
All the diligence and frugality come to no avail,
so is my ambition to pursue fame and fortune cut short.
How could these days compare to my life before marriage,
when I only cared to please my parents and relish life, worriless about adversities.
I can only pause my needlework to pay off my poetry debt,
or review episodes of writing to dispel my regret in heart. (2: 7, 279-80)

Such extensive, confessional portrayals of her life in Blossom from the Brush and many other tanci works, Hu Siao-chen suggests, reflect the porous and shifting division between the public and private. Whereas authors, with their opening lines in
every section, invited readers for instruction and feedback, they garnered potential power relationships when their writings were handcopied or printed for circulation among women and some male readers. Hu Siao-chen argues that the author's self-references and insertions, though delivered in a confessional tone in the first-person voice, are voluminous and minute to the extent of self-exhibitionism. This narrative strategy showcases *tanci* authors' exploration of the writing medium between private and public worlds, using a private stance to share feelings and emotions with readers, ostensibly understating the public existence and the impact of their writings beyond the inner chambers (*Cainü*). Qiu's self-fashioning projects the authorial persona who strives to speak to the public in a feminine voice. This gendered voice grieves personal suffering and misfortune, aspiring to a fictional world of affluence, pleasure, and ethical justice.

*Bishenghua* reflects a semi-autobiographical approach to express personal feelings and desires. Qiu's appropriation of "private writing" or "secret writing" provides a prudent disguise of women's desire to obtain freedom and affirmation in the public space. However, the authorial reflections display Qiu's explorations of the rhetoric of inviting sympathy through characterization and the creation of narrative tropes. She states, "Do not say that writing is but a play with the brushes about fictional matters, / when the story comes to its crisis the author also agonizes for the characters" (1: 2, 46). She takes joy in creating events and making imaginary interventions to recreate the lives of the protagonists: "Overturning the clouds and raising the rain following my preferences, churning up the waves and stirring the tide I create them at my pleasure" (5: 18, 803). This creative freedom partly helps her "dispel worries" about her indigent life and enchants her with the allure and thrills of the fictional world: "Lamenting my situation, impoverished as I am, I am too ashamed to mention to others; borrowing the happiness [of the characters], what harm does it do to just boast affluence on paper?" (6: 23, 1033). Writing initiates her into intersubjective identification with her characters, yet brings up the ironic distance between her poetic ideal and the humble existence of human beings, as she expresses in the end of her book: "An allegory of man's earthly dream of fortune and eminence, this book on the glory of the world resembles the bubbles on the water" (7: 25, 1177). Meandering in and out of the story, Qiu's authorial narrator engages the audience of her tale on two levels, both as "the narrative audience that exists on the same fictional plane as the narrator, and as the authorial audience that seeks to understand the whole communication from the author, as well as the function of the narrative audience" (Phelan 204). If the narrative strategy of Qiu's *tanci* is to questions the reader's position and his or her access to the truth, it supports an elusive authorial presence conditioned by orthodox gender propriety and frustrated by its uneasy speaking position.

Being a devoted reader of *Zaishengyuan* (Destiny of Rebirth), Qiu holds high regard for this *tanci*, but criticizes the unconventional character of the heroine Lijun and a few other characters whose deeds exceed the restraints of feminine virtue. Qiu's discontent with Destiny of Rebirth is not a unique case. Her predecessor, *tanci*
author and editor Hou Zhi, criticized Chen's bold portrayal of the overtly adventurous Lijun and took to a form of corrective adaptation in *Zaizuo tian* (Remaking Heaven, 1828) by editing and remolding the plot and characters on the basis of Chen's original *tanci*. Yet as Ellen Widmer points out, in probing beneath the surface of Hou's didactic *tanci*, "one discovers the ways in which the didacticism hides as well as conceals," and how "expressions of female talent might maneuver through taboos" (Widmer, *Beauty* 75). Qiu's work stages a likewise didactic author, who endeavors to redress the moral message of *Zhengsheng yuan* by telling another kind of cross-dressing story.

Qiu's authorial narrator comments:

The newly printed *Destiny of Rebirth*,
those who love *tanci* vied for circulating it.
The style of the writing is refined and genteel, and not at all ordinary,
the diction and knowledge of the author is truly exceptional and the work
is well worth reading.
Having evaluated all the *tanci*, I consider this one the best,
except that the authorial intention bears minor imperfection.
Liu Yanyu forgives a secret engagement and fails to follow the "Three Obediences";
how could she deserve to enjoy the prestigious name Lady of Chastity and Filial Piety?
*Admonishment for Women* says, "Those who suffer lack in one act will bear corruption in every other act,"
not to mention that Liu married without matchmaking, and could not be considered as virtuous.
Li Baohe has competency in her talent, looks, chastity, and virtue;
and is skillful in handling political affairs and composing literature.
Yet she suffers the deficiency of failing at filial piety,
even impulsively abandons her inborn indebtedness for her parents' meticulous nurturing.
When I read the part of her declining to tell the truth to the Emperor in the Golden Palace,
Her deeds of humiliating her father and deceiving the Emperor are far too erroneous.
These are the real insufficiencies of this *tanci* despite its beauty,
as the saying goes, out of the hundred virtues in the earthly realm, filial piety is of foremost importance.
Thus I alter the previous *tanci*’s intention and renovate its tune,
Privately ridicule my own ignorance, and venture to say some bold words.

This extensive reflection on *Destiny of Rebirth* yields rich implications about Qiu's authorial stance, going beyond her self-effacement on the surface. Qiu's allusion to the Han didactic text, *Admonishment for Women*, authored by the female historian Ban Zhao, identifies her authorial position as that of a moral instructress. This ethically conscious self-positioning can be understood in the context of women's literature during the high Qing era. Brought up in a Confucian intellectual family background, Qiu was not alone among her predecessors and contemporaries,
gentrified women authors whose writing positions were strongly conditioned by and perceived through Confucian social and ethical values. However, her evocation of the penultimate female mentor Ban Zhao and her writing plays a double role in the text. Rosenlee argues that, although conservative texts like *Nüjie* (*Admonitions for Women*) are a source for reinforcing orthodox values of gender propriety on women who are confined to the inner sphere, they are also a source of empowerment for erudite women authors (110). Adopting moral propriety as a source of empowerment within the orthodox discourses on feminine virtues, Qiu's representation of an ethically conscious authorial identity lays a moralist veneer over her intrinsic longing to tell a story of her own through adaptation and rewriting.

This ethical authorial stance finds strong articulation in Qiu's choice of having Dehua revert back to marriage and a domestic life when her cross-dressing is exposed. *Zaishengyuan* was a tale that left readers dangling in suspense when Lijun, pressed by the emperor to become his concubine, spits blood and nearly loses her life. Chen's dilemma in concluding the story is emblematic of a narrative contradiction in which "the desire to reach the end is the desire to see 'truth' unveiled" (Brooks, *Body Work* 19). Brooks, reflecting on Barthe's model of narrative as striptease, refers to the "classic" (or "readable") text that works toward a progressive solution of preliminary enigmas, toward a full predication of the narrative "sentence," toward a plenitude of meaning (*Body Work* 19). However, in *Zaishengyuan*, it is nearly unthinkable, as the text indicates, for the unyielding Lijun to concede to the truth, that is, her feminine identity, and revert to a domestic life. Chen's *tanci* visualizes Lijun's cross-dressed body as "a vehicle of narrative signification," and comes to a forced nonclosure with the implication of Lijun's death. In *Bishenghua*, Qiu circumvents this narrative dilemma by making Dehua convert to her feminine identity again, re-dressing Dehua with the moral raiment of virtue and heroism. Qiu's fictional brush strokes bestow her heroine with new forms of power and agency within the normative social and familial system. Dehua's conciliatory sacrifices paradoxically bring her a degree of autonomy in exchange, as her return to the inner chambers happens in a congenial situation.

Susan Mann insightfully argues that women's inner chambers can be considered "a haven" that protects elite women from "daily contact with material corruption (or the dusty world)" (*Precious Records* 49). The inner chambers also functioned as "a powerful trope in writings by men about women during the eighteenth century. For many men resisting the pressures of scholarly careers, women appeared as guardians of stability, order, and purity" (*Precious Records* 50). In *Bishenghua*, the heroine's return to the inner chambers reconfigures the domestic space as a site of feminine power and authority. Qiu's re-creation of the plot initiates the heroine into another life stage, in which she acts as an ideal daughter, prioritizes the prosperity of family, and strives to "fulfill her responsibility and make every person in the boudoir find her own place" (7: 26, 1208). She applies her ingenuity and military skills to governing her household, endorsing the filial and chaste, and taming the shrewish. Her glory is even passed onto her offspring, who share her surname and royal title. Her son is named Jiang Jisheng, or "continuing life," and her late-born younger
brother is named Jiang Yousheng, or "born once again." These names suggest that Dehua has extended her life cycle and established continuous power and authority. The book ends with Dehua and her husband Shaoxia transforming into Daoist immortals. This ending projects an ideal of transcending death and achieving spiritual immortality and offers an imaginary alternative to Lijun's predicament of being forced to choose between death and returning to marriage. Dehua's compromise, in view of the plot development, appears to be both an ethical choice and a narrative necessity which ensures the survival of Dehua's tale after the exposure of her identity.

In refashioning the cross-dressing scenario, Qiu depicts Dehua's metamorphosis into a man as an outcome of supernatural intervention, rather than a self-made choice. After she is rescued from suicide by the fox spirit Yuexian, Dehua is given a man's attire and some magical pellets. "After taking the pellets, Dehua miraculously changes into a man's look, / It turns out that, after taking the magical pellets she has enhanced her courage, / and with elated spirit, she goes so far as to claim herself a man. / Not only is her intelligence superior to that of the old days, / she seems to also acquire more enhanced strength than before. / Hence she does not have any fear in her heart, / her mind is open and candid, with no vacillation" (2: 7, 306).

Dynastic Chinese literature and culture offer rich imaginative interpretations of the fox and its magical powers. In Qiu's refashioning of the cross-dressing plot, the supernatural intervention carries a deeper function than just enlivening the story. The preparation of Dehua's masculine makeover through the power of the fantastic eliminates the moral culpability of the heroine for boldly venturing into the exterior sphere. Qiu adds an intriguing scenario in which the cross-dressed heroine's bound feet are hidden. After changing her dress, Dehua is transformed into a young and handsome scholar. However, her three-inch bound feet are difficult to conceal in a pair of large men's boots. Yuexian offers assistance:

With a smile the fairy lady tears up Dehua's feminine dress, saying that now this dress is useless. One strand after another, she tears the clothes into pieces and hands them to Dehua, who does not hesitate in wrapping her feet with the clothes. After finishing wrapping she stands up and takes a few steps slowly; her manner is quite proper and solemn. Yuexian claps her hands and praises, "Fanciful!" And mocks her as being indeed a genteel and beautiful young man. (2: 7, 305-06)

This process of binding the feet with Dehua's torn dress reflects Dehua's entrance into a new life. Unlike the solitary Lijun, who laments the risks of leaving home before cross-dressing, Dehua is blessed with Yuexian's assistance and instructions. Yuexian claims that she offers assistance to the chaste Dehua in order to mediate a heavenly mandate and to return the favor of being sheltered by Dehua's family for many years. Dehua's cross-dressing is doubly legitimized by the necessity of safeguarding her chastity and the rationale of moral compensation for the good. To protect Dehua, Yuexian ventures to substitute for her and to enjoy a playful journey
to the palace. She says, "The king is laughably lascivious, / I shall tease him, and make him fruitlessly yearn for beauty" (2: 7, 306). This scenario illustrates the fox spirit as a supernatural agent who utilizes her powers to circumvent the emperor's evil tyranny.

Beautiful and talented, Dehua coalesces the strongest assets of the talented Lijun and several other characters in Chen's Zaishengyuan. One may find in Dehua mirror-images of Lijun's chaste Su Yingxue, who substitutes Lijun as the bride in the arranged marriage and attempts suicide to protect her chastity; the ingenious Huangfu Zhanghua, who boasts magical skills and swordsmanship; and the cross-dressed female general Lady Wei, who has exceptional valor and military strategies. Set in the historical context of the late Ming, when the palace was under the manipulation of eunuchs and rancorous royal relatives, Qiu portrays Dehua as a talented woman who is destined to rise in a polemical era to shield the court and defend the nation, indicating that the heroine is obliged to follow established moral principles in order to exert a personal effect on the country and the nation. When her identity is disclosed, the empress dowager praises her as "a goddess of literature who descends to the ordinary world" and even goes on to say, "How surprising, joyous, and admirable, / a woman assists the Emperor and ensures the peace of the country. / The land of the Ming palace is revived, / solely because of this lady" (6: 23, 1034). This passage attests to the moment when the heroine's achievement is not devalued by the disclosure of her cross-dressing, but rather reaches its most glorious moment because of her gender. The appreciative empress dowager endorses Dehua's meritorious triumph as a blessing for her country.

This fictional arrangement illustrates Qiu's possible aspiration to reassess the heroine's gendered identity and reconfigures the inner-outer continuum in broader social and national contexts. Susan Mann suggests that nineteenth-century women's writings show a keen interest in the state of the country and an astute cognizance of issues that belonged to the domain of men, "beyond the women's quarters" ("The Lady and the State" 283). Heroic women in tanci writings of this era portray numerous images of women warriors, leaders, and politicians who bespeak women as what Mann terms "a constituency of the polity" (286).

In Qiu's text, she might also have been drawn to illustrious images of heroic women warriors in the history of her hometown. Qiu's native Shanyang, or Huai'An county, was the hometown of the Song female warrior Liang Hongyu (梁紅玉, 1102-35), who was well known for her strategism and bravery while assisting her husband in warfare and presenting herself as epitomizing military morale (Dong, Mulan's Legend 21). Another historical figure is the celebrated late Ming female general Qin Liangyu (秦良玉, 1574-1648), who had triumphantly assisted Emperor Chongzhen in appeasing several local rebellions in the southwest regions (Mulan's Legend 26). Among several theories about Qin's birthplace, one school of thought holds that she was born in Huai'An County, Qiu's hometown. She was said to have dressed in men's clothing in the battlefield and taken on women's dress when going to the court. These two historical figures might have inspired Qiu in her characterization of the
militant Dehua. Both female generals in history were awarded royal titles: Liang had the title Lady of Heroism and Chastity; Qin was honored as Marquise of Loyalty and Chastity. In the text, Dehua's title reflects those of both historical figures, suggesting a potent female military legacy.

As Lan Dong states in her study of the legacy of the legendary Mulan: "The image of the woman being a warrior on the battlefield or in martial confrontation violates the gender separation that requires women to stay inside the female living quarters. In this sense, a courageous heroine defies her assigned gender space by marching into a conventionally masculine territory where she either equals or frequently outwits and outperforms her male contemporaries" (*Mulan's Legend* 12). Such potentially transgressive acts on the part of fictional heroines or historical women are, however, carefully balanced with their "compliance with the simultaneously prevailing ethical codes" (12). Dehua's association with female military historical figures is illustrated through her dream encounter with the legendary Lady Sun, who herself is depicted as a personification of female virtue and heroism. One day Dehua dreams of the fox spirit Yuexian, who leads her to meet Lady Sun, the younger sister of the Wu general Sun Quan in the Three Kingdom period. A famous warrior, Lady Sun is married to Liu Bei (劉備), the King of the Shu Kingdom. After her parents' death, she is taken by grief and homesickness and commits suicide by drowning herself. The Jade Emperor in Heaven pities her and makes her an immortal who sees to it that chaste and filially devoted women are given blessings and fortune, and that the lascivious and shrewd are punished. Moved by Dehua's valiant deeds, Lady Sun makes Dehua an exemplar of the seminal virtues of loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness. She teaches Dehua military strategies, saying, "Now that the Holy Palace is suffering a misfortune, / how will it ever secure the country with writing brushes? / Today I shall instruct you in the art of war, / so that in the future you can assist the Emperor and accomplish remarkable achievements" (4: 16, 749). She offers Dehua a brocade book with a jade rod, which records the military heritage of the Wu Kingdom. Upon Dehua's request, Lady Sun puts on her armor, takes up her sword, and personally instructs Dehua in martial art skills. Lady Sun finally gives Dehua a precious sword as a gift and proves that her encounter in the dream is real. When Dehua wakes up, she finds by her side an authentic ancient sword which bears inscriptions made in the Han Dynasty and the era name of the Wu Kingdom.

The sword, as portrayed in the above scenario, is a frequently used metaphor in *tanci*, suggesting power, self-defense, and the possibility of action. Hu Siao-chchen incisively states, in *Tianyuhua* (Heaven Rains Flowers), when the heroine Zuo Yizhen requests that her father allow her to carry his sword for self-protection, that the presentation of the sword represents the transference of authority and power from the father to the daughter, a symbolic "borrowing" of the father's masculinity (Hu, Siao-chchen, "The Daughter's Vision" 200-31; "War, Violence" 257; for women's poetic references of sword as a martial imagery, see Li, Wai-yee, "Late Ming Courtesan" 196-201). In Qiu's *tanci*, the reference of the sword is reworked to represent a matriarchal tradition of militancy, which substitutes the paternal authority that is
often associated with the sword imagery. Dehua's dream encounter with Lady Sun signifies a ritual in which the heroine returns to the maternal ancestor for sustenance and empowerment. With the book and the sword, Dehua swiftly acquires excellent skills in swordsmanship and warfare, and puts her assets to use when she is summoned by the palace to put down political upheavals.

Unlike the ambitious Lijun, who would "exchange the feminine hairdo for an official coif," Dehua takes to the civil service exam rather passively, urged by her uncle Governor Xie who admires her talent in literature. The text illustrates her hesitation and fear of failure:

When I change into men's clothing,
I am only to escape from the turbulent conflicts with rapacious people in power.
How could I go to the capital to attend the Exam?
If my disguise is seen through by others,
The disaster is nothing but small. . . .
Yet judging by the situation, Uncle is determined to press me to attend the Exam.
What should I do? Ay, all right! I will just go there once.
Even though I am just a woman,
I believe that my talent is competent to rank the first.
Composing poems within seven steps, I am fearless.
Finding the lines in the interval of crossing fingers eight times is nothing difficult for me.
This time, if I am fortunate to rank high on the Golden Rolls,
Then I can take my wife and return home with glory.
This will save the parents from lamenting having no sons,
By that time, my parents will enjoy prodigious honor themselves. (3: 9, 400)

The passage demonstrates that Dehua shares with Lijun the consciousness that a talented woman is frequently at odds with her fate. As Dehua's worries about the risk of attending the exam are replaced with concerns about family pressure, she takes on a more confident tone, comparing herself to two endowed male poets, including Cao Zhi (曹植, 192-232), who could compose a poem during the interval of taking seven steps, and Wen Tingjun (温庭筠, 812-70), who could finish one rhyme in a short time while crossing his fingers, and the eight rhymes of a full poem after eight finger-crossings. Dehua's self-positioning vis-à-vis the male elites legitimizes her achievement as a learned woman. Reading Dehua's thoughts against the author's self-reflective statements about women's writing, readers may detect a subtle but visible linkage between the ambitious heroine and Qiu, and their shared concerns of enacting a feminine literati identity by actively inscribing women into the paternal literary lineage. The following lines, nonetheless, display her utilizing her success to bring her family and ancestors prestige, suggesting that Dehua, who by this time is cross-dressed and married to Yunxian, internalizes a masculine identity as defined and constructed by traditional Confucian family and moral values.

Dehua's internalization of an orthodox masculine subjectivity both liberates and constrains her life and actions after cross-dressing. While her disguise offers her autonomy and freedom to explore a man's life, she performs mostly as a substitute
husband and later, with the birth of Xialang, as a substitute father when the real husband and father is absent. In Qiu's plot arrangement, Dehua's cross-dressing prepares for the establishment of her final marriage with Shaoxia, with Chunniang marrying Shaoxia as a concubine, and Xialang carrying on the name of his own father. This conventional arrangement is akin to that in Liang Desheng's sequel to Zaishengyuan, in which Liang makes the adventurous Lijun reconcile with the emperor and marry Shaohua, while her wife in mock marriage becomes Shaohua's concubine. Qiu's indoctrination of her characters with moral norms creates differences between Dehua and Lijun. Lijun passionately denies her cross-dressing when confronted by her own parents and cuts herself completely off from her relatives. This drastic denunciation of her female identity and the father-daughter relationship puts Lijun in an ethical dilemma for undermining the father-daughter hierarchical relation. In Qiu's tanci, Dehua confesses her secret to her parents before her cross-dressing is exposed. After she changes back to her feminine dress and marries Shaohua, she lives with her parents and even fasts a whole year to pray that heaven will endow her aged father with a son to carry on the maternal family name, Jiang. Qiu's conservative stance is also displayed in her depiction of male-female relationships. She changes the relationship between the heroine and her fiancée from that of the mentor-student relationship between Lijun and Shaohua in Zaishengyuan to a form of brotherhood between Dehua and Shaoxia. The disguised Dehua is therefore exempted from the moral hazard of drastically reverting to the husband-wife hierarchy.

Perhaps Qiu's depiction of the male-female relationship after Shaoxia and Dehua's marriage reveals a facet of gender relationships that Chen Duansheng did not choose or did not have a chance to depict. With Shaoxia residing with Dehua's maternal family, and Dehua preceding him in the prime minister's position, the wife Dehua holds more than the usual power in their marriage. This arrangement is an ingenious reconfiguration of the orthodox marriage. In traditional China, marriage was "a contract between two families that established a relationship in which the woman was unambiguously subordinate and in which husband and wife assumed legal standing and responsibility not only in regard to each other, but also in regard to each other's relatives" (Liu, Kwang-Ching 218). The relationships between husband and wife were "theoretically at once hierarchical and reciprocal." Although in practice, this was not always the case: "Reciprocity was generally neglected, and the husband's will and needs dominated. Still, unless a man could afford a concubine, he could not risk alienating his wife by oppressing her too severely, for it was through her 'uterine' family that he achieved immortality in the ritual sacrifices made to him by his descendants" (Liu, Kwang-Ching 223).

Bishenghua portrays an unusual reconfiguration of this traditional matrimonial system. After Dehua again dons her feminine dress, she returns to her maternal household and takes Shaoxia as her husband in her maternal family. She follows the emperor's command to use her surname Jiang as the family surname for her descendants. These measures strengthen the authority of the heroine's uterine family, ensuring her power in the boudoir, without breaking down the conventional marriage
system. Rather, after her marriage, Dehua plays an active role in consolidating her husband's power and, by doing so, finds means of refurbishing her feminine virtue. When Shaoxia and Dehua are newly married, Dehua hopes to persuade Shaoxia into taking two serving maids as concubines, but the idea is rejected by Shaoxia, who alludes to the ancient affectionate couple Liang Hong and Meng Guang to express his determination to stay faithful to Dehua. Unwilling to upset Dehua, he pretends to accept her proposal of taking the concubines, while secretly plotting to upset Dehua's plan and have the two concubines married to two male study mates. The text presents a family melodrama in which husband and wife try to outwit each other. Afraid of upsetting Dehua and stirring up her grievances, Shaoxia ponders:

Let me first give a vague response to Dehua and wait for another time to reason with her.
Even ruling an army could not require too much deception,
What is the harm in using a little scheming in governing a household?
When the time comes, I shall take action and uphold the authority of the husband,
and I shall definitely tame this brilliant and extraordinary troupe of women.
When the meal is fully cooked,
Dehua shall have no way to disagree with me.
Thus my wife's heart can be appeased, the risk of family dissonance dissolved. (7: 26, 1199)

Despite his ingenuous plan, Dehua outwits Shaoxia when she sees through his scheme and arranges two other maidens to marry Shaoxia's study servants. She presses Shaoxia into accepting the concubines, who present themselves in wedding gowns and plead for the master to accept them. This subplot of Dehua appropriating Shaoxia's scheme to spoil his own plan recalls the melodramatic scenes in Tianyuhua (Heaven Rains Flowers), in which a male character Heng Yu, after marrying the genteel but stubborn lady Zuo Yizhen, sets up multiple contrivances in order to tame Yizhen, only making her more rebellious against his dominance in the house. Finally, she retreats to the garden and takes it as a personal space of autonomy. There is no textual evidence that proves Qiu read Tianyuhua. However, this seventeenth-century tanci was circulated through print and had achieved a prestigious reputation by Qiu's time. The subplot of Dehua coaxing her husband into taking concubines is also reminiscent of an episode in Heaven Rains Flowers in which the hero Weiming's mother, deceived by a housemaid, plots to make Weiming drunk and take the maid as his concubine. When Weiming wakes up, he instantly rejects the arrangement. Later in the story, the self-disciplined Weiming resists temptations laid out by a fox spirit, a palace maiden, and a lascivious nun. In Qiu's tanci, however, this moralistic impulse in the narrative is adapted to emphasize the values of feminine virtue. Dehua gains the upper hand by making her husband take the concubines as she desires, because her own children are commanded by the emperor to carry their maternal surname Jiang, instead of Shaoxia's surname Wen. Her seemingly disobedient arrangement against Shaohua's will is made precisely in order to endorse the husband's authority.
Having transcended earthly yearnings, Dehua assists Shaoxia to obtain more offspring and solidifies her own sovereignty.

Qiu also modelled her text upon previous *tanci* works in order to highlight the heroine's moral agency. *Xiaojingqian* (Little Gold Coins), for instance, tells the tale of a childless heroine Chen Yuechan (陳月嬋), who offers incense to the heavenly emperor and pleads with him to give her a child. She succeeds in moving heaven with her sincere wishes and later gives birth to two children. This scenario is alluded to in *Bishenghua* (4: 15, 695). One day, when Dehua is still cross-dressed as Jiang Junbi, her mother-in-law summons a female *tanci* storyteller to the inner chambers to perform this episode in *Xiaoijingqian*. Later in Qiu's *tanci*, a similar scenario is portrayed. Dehua has been given the emperor's verdict that her son shall carry the maternal surname Jiang. One day, her son Jiang Wencai (姜文彩) tells her that a relative of the family mocks Wencai for not being the direct descendant of the Jiangs, saying that he should use his father's surname Wen. To extinguish such talk, Dehua decides to help her aged parents give birth to a brother who carries on the family surname. She vows to live an abstinent life for a whole year, and every night offers fragrance to the moon, praying for heaven to give her parents a son. Her filial deeds eventually move heaven; her father's concubine gives birth to a son. Qiu's adaptation accentuates the heroine's feminine virtue and love for her parents, which distinguishes Dehua from the rebellious Lijun and elevates the original plot from one about conjugal love in *Xiaojingqian* (Little Gold Coins) to a morally instructive tale about filial devotion.

Qiu's propagation of orthodox moral values and gender propriety reproduces her *tanci* as an alternate cross-dressing story to Chen Duansheng's *Zaishengyuan*. Qiu's strong ethical awareness underlies her choice of rewriting the story and making Dehua revert back to her feminine identity to become one of Shaoxia's wives in a polygamous family. Whereas Dehua's return to her female identity opens up new narrative possibilities, Qiu's text cannot avoid the narrative conventions of previous *tanci* tales in undercutting Dehua's mobility with the constraints of feminine virtue. The text empowers the heroine by adding elements of supernatural intervention and evoking the legacy of female military agency. Conversely, these measures are cautiously made to legitimize the orthodox rationales of filial piety and feminine chastity. Although Dehua's unusual achievement reflects women's extraordinary potential to achieve success as men's peers, Dehua's personal identity has rarely been more than that of a substitute son, husband, or father. The text's lively depiction of Dehua's domestic life after marrying Shaoxia, though showing her continued authority and power, cannot conceal her considerable reconciliation and sacrifice. Whether such an arrangement reflects a conciliatory and realistic vision or Qiu's internalization of Confucian moral values, the readers cannot ignore the painful conflicts between personal ideal and societal pressure, between individual pursuits and familial obligations. In a nutshell, Qiu's choice of making Dehua a Daoist immortal is an ultimate, if imaginary, device used to resolve the author's reconfiguration of the plot and the impossibility of finding correspondent external cultural and social references.
As in Zaishengyuan, motifs of supernatural forces play a crucial role in the development of plot in Bishenghua. The fox spirit Yuexian rescues Dehua from drowning herself, transforms into Dehua's form, and takes her place in the palace. Ming and Qing fictional works often depict stories of a beautiful fox lady who assists young and impoverished scholars to study and obtain success. In Qiu's text, the fox serves as a supernatural device who substitutes for the heroine and helps her protect her virginity and pursue her personal desire beyond gender boundaries. Qiu's reconfiguration of the fox image illustrates the blurred boundaries between nüxian (女仙), or female immortals or celestials, and nüyao (女妖), the female spirit transformed from female demons or spirits in traditional narratives.

The difference between a demonic and celestial being lies in the figure's origin and the point of view of the person referring to it. In Chinese folk imagination, demons and spirits derive from animals or from inanimate objects such as statues, as portrayed in the Qing classic story collection 聊齋誌異 (Liaozhai zhiyi, Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio). Through self-cultivation or absorbing the essence of nature, often for thousands of years, these animals and objects are able to attain supernatural powers and transform into human forms. The celestials or immortals were either humans who had attained their elevated status and powers through being taught the secrets by other celestials, or beings who had an affinity with the heavenly realm or reincarnated spirits. Yunxian "had a celestial root in her previous life, and thus, could easily become an immortal" with practice (8: 30, 1438). Thanks to her virtuous deeds, the fox spirit is elevated to a higher rank equal to that of an immortal such as Lady Sun, the heroic woman who was transformed into an immortal because of her filial piety. Yunxian, a self-cultivated immortal, is honored together with the fox spirit in the Sanctuary of Three Immortals. The fluid boundaries between demons, humans, immortals, and celestials are redefined by the moral principles of chastity and filial piety (Chen, Fan Pen Li, Chinese Shadow Theater).

Qiu's rendering of the fox spirit can be understood in light of dynastic imaginings related to fox spirits. According to the sixteenth-century folk fiction 封神演義 (Fengshen yanyi, The Investiture of the Gods), in the ancient dynasty of Shang, a concubine, Su Daji (蘇妲己), was killed by a fox spirit who transformed into her beautiful form in order to seduce King Zhou with carnal pleasure and to bewitch him into abandoning his governance of the country. The fox spirit Daji is portrayed in later historical novels as representing licentious women who were often created "to present a contrast between virtuous heroes who resist them and the virtueless villains who yield to them . . . representing the lusts of the flesh, these women bring forward an illustration that lust (for women) is disaster-prone and must be curbed" (Chang, Shelley Hsueh-lun 149-50). Daji is also portrayed in the form of a femme fatale who preys on men in the Ming text Fengshen yanyi. During the High Qing era, the popularity of the fox in novels, popular stories, and folk religion reached a climax. The image of the fox borders between the monster and the transcendent, the human and nonhuman. In romance and love tales, the fox is often a symbol of sexual passion and desire, stirred up by human beings' own moral weaknesses or misbehavior.
As Huntington argues, in Ming and Qing, there were folk practices of fox worship conducted to establish a connection with the supernatural. Fox spirits in popular religious practices were elevated to the level of "divine beings, particularly beautiful women, who have acquired immortality through Daoist self-cultivation. To call a fox spirit a *xian* is to make it become morally acceptable" (Huntington, *Alien Kind* 134).

In *Bishenghua*, this blending of fox spirit and immorality is characterized by the mischievous yet sympathetic Hu Yuexian, whose surname puns on the sound of "fox" and whose given name literally means "moon goddess." When, on her way to the capital, Dehua attempts to hang herself to die chaste for her fiancé, the fox spirit Yuexian raises a gust of wind to carry the heroine into a small lodging and uses magic powers to breathe life into her body. When Dehua wakes up, she is astonished to see a lady who seems to be the fairy lady she had previously met in a garden at her own house. The lady introduces herself:

Don't say that I belong to the alien kind,  
After many years I have attained the Dao and possess the ingenuous perception.  
I have wanted to leave this body and ascend to heaven,  
However, I was bound by destiny to you and have not reached my time.  
In your respectful garden, I have borrowed a place to reside.  
With your family I am also sheltered safely,  
Thanks to your lady who has treated me with courtesy and never beguiled me.  
Thus I have carried a wish to return your favor,  
And come to save your life, and exempt you from calamities.  
Now you shall follow the good scheme of "shedding your cover like the golden cicada."  
I also bring a set of scholarly attire as a gift for you.  
From now on you should put on the disguise,  
And go to the governor of Shandong whose wife is your maternal aunt.  
(2: 7, 305)

The text represents the fox spirit Hu Yuexian as a divine agent whose magic rescues the heroine from suicide. The scene in which Yuexian binds Dehua's feet with her torn dress reflects Dehua's entrance into a completely new life. Yuexian is a trickster-like character who has the ability to summon magical powers, transform into other's appearances, or vanish into thin air. She ventures to take the place of Dehua to "enjoy a playful journey to the palace," using her powers to circumvent the emperor's tyranny.

The text later portrays Yunxian as a disciple of the fox spirit, who, after assisting Dehua and her family to survive many calamities, is honored with the rank of female immortal. After Dehua changes back to feminine dress, her "wife" Yunxian, who is devoted to Daoist practice, strongly opposes marrying Shaohua as his concubine. Instead, having heard of the fox spirit's heroic deeds, she decides to take to private Daoist practice in a secluded garden in the Jiang house, where the fox
spirit had previously resided and where she returned after she vanished from the wedding with Shaohua. Hu Siao-chen proposes that Yunxian's identification with the transcendent fox spirit, her denunciation of familial linkages, and her rejection of a marriage prospect indicate women's self-exile from orthodox social relationships. The garden where she resides in seclusion becomes a private space of agency, locating her beyond the restrictions of womanly virtue and family relationships ("Mimi huayuan" 299; on Ming garden culture, see Clunas 63-103). This arrangement presents Yunxian and Dehua as doubles choosing divergent paths: one fleeing from the secular, the other continuing her worldly journey after reverting back to her feminine identity. Hu holds that such an arrangement reveals "an authorial desire for a secret garden of self-exile, seclusion, and spiritual transcendence" ("Mimi huayuan" 299; also see Che 97-101).

Qiu's reconfiguration of the fox trope in the novel is constituent of her overall idealization of Daoist immortality. The subplot of Yunxian becoming a female immortal through Daoist practice reflects a trend of women seeking to substitute marriage with the pursuit of immortality. The representation of female immortals in Chinese culture may be found in the ancient book搜神記 (Soushen ji, In Search of the Supernatural) by Gan Bao (干寶, 217-419 CE), where the Daoist search for immortality was widely recorded in stories and popular narratives. In several stories in Gan's text, the female immortals are devoted to comforting men and bringing them extraordinary children and gifts. These immortals always cater to men's needs, whether supporting them materially or bearing their children (Wang, Robin 197). In Bishenghua, however, Yunxian's Daoist practice is justified by her intention to keep her virginity and her spiritual pursuit beyond the constraint of the marriage paradigm. Her image is reminiscent of female Daoist immortals in Qing dynasty popular literature who are characterized by their refusal to marry in order to live lives of celibacy, or, in some more subversive texts, to transcend socially inscribed gender roles (Grant, "Patterns" 9-13; see also Cleary, Immortal Sisters). In the text, Yunxian's Daoist practice is shielded and supported by the cross-dressed Dehua, who plays the role of Yunxian's husband to the elders and the outsiders and hides her secret of spiritual alchemy. After Dehua converts back to her female identity, Yunxian's devotion to Daoism protects her from being married to Shaohua in a polygamous family. When she is pressed by her parents to marry Shaoxia as his concubine, Yunxian instantly protests against such a fate and suggests suicide:

Grabbing her jade hairpin, she thrusts it on the floor.
With a piercing sound, the hairpin breaks in halves.
Turning back, she calls on her father:
My father, your child would rather be beheaded than change her intention.
When time comes up for me to remarry, I shall be the same as this broken hairpin.
If my parents still have pity for their daughter,
Please allow her to linger in the world for some more time.
Refining my true nature, comprehending the real principles,
I shall certainly complete my practice one day and ascend to the Nine Heavens.
It has been said that a child who ascends to heaven shall take his relatives
with him;
By that time, isn't it true that my parents shall become immortals as well?
Why am I obliged to fulfill the marriage engagement?
In this situation, what esteem will I have when I put back on a girl's dress and hairpins?
After saying this, the young lady turns pale,
Minister Xie feels at once angry, incredulous, and compassionate. (6: 22, 1022)

After persuading her parents, Yunxian puts on a Daoist robe. Her astonished relatives "see that she is dressed in an extraordinary way all over, / her long dress with long sleeves is replaced with a Daoist robe. / With no make-up or flower decorations, she wears instead a nun's crown and a robe" (6: 22, 1023). Her self-transformation through religious pursuit represents a cultural trend in Ming Qing women's religious practice which is considered harmless to the patriarchal hierarchy and allows women to transcend social reality and aspire to spiritual freedom (see Zhou, Yiqun 109-55). It should also be noted that there was a strong social trend of Daoist pursuit for immortality during the Ming Jiajing period, which is the era chosen by Qiu as the context for the second half of her *tanci*. Maggie C. K. Wan offers a study of Ming emperor Jiajing's retreat to Xiyuan (西苑), the West Park in 1542 which she holds is closely related to his lifelong belief in Daoism and his pursuit of physical immorality (Wan 65-99). Late imperial household instructions and values "placed enormous stress on female propriety as a primary symbol of domestic virtue, not by expecting women to be active guardians of a 'feminized' realm of culture, but simply by making women objects of paternalistic molding. On the other hand, wives were seen as the main source of religious heterodoxy within the family" (Liu, Kwang-Ching 202). Liu further suggests that "there is reason to believe that some forms of popular worship, both inside and outside the home, were a female sphere in late traditional China. Women presided over the religious mediation of fertility, childbirth, and many illnesses, requiring the services of specialists devoted to a variety of popular spirits. Many visited temples on holidays" (202). Likewise, Beata Grant states that literati women viewed visiting convents and monasteries as a means of emotional release, and they enjoyed exchanging conversations with women monastics (Grant, *Eminent Nuns* 97). Female forms of religious practice, whether driven by piety or a preoccupation with otherworldly salvation, were largely carried on within the framework of the patriarchal home and offered the system little to fear. In the medieval Song era (960-1279), for example, women's ascetic self-cultivation—including fasting, seclusion, and vegetarianism—as gendered practices were customary and endorsed by literati as fitting in the "paradigm of feminine virtue" (Lu, Huitzu 73-108). Female religious practice, in other words, suits the pattern of "religious pluralism" coexisting with "moral orthodoxy" (Liu, Kwang-Ching 202). Popular religious texts of the late imperial period, in addition to illustrating celibate women Daoists, portrayed heroines who were not capable of avoiding marriage or childbearing, some of whom persisted in Daoist practice in search of spiritual life and salvation (Grant, "Patterns" 16).
In the text, the ideal of becoming a female immortal is centrally represented by Yunxian's experience. In the more advanced stage of her practice, she is able to vanish into thin air, and even predict the fate of others, by reading astrology. When her sister-in-law Peilan's life is at risk during childbirth, Yunxian draws a magic talisman and has it delivered to Peilan. After Peilan drinks a cup of water mixed with the ashes of the burned talisman, she miraculously recovers and gives birth to a daughter. Later, Yunxian accomplishes her study and ascends to heaven. To commemorate her love for Yunxian, Dehua draws a portrait of her and offers incense to it. Later in the story, Yunxian is a mediator between the earth and the heavenly realm. She enters Dehua's dream and gives her a bottle of magical wine. After she drinks the wine, the elders of the Wen and Jiang families enjoy health and longevity. Dehua and her husband Shaoxia, both being immortal in their previous lives, obtain ageless beauty from the wine, and become immortals themselves. Another concubine of Shaoxia's, the stubborn and vengeful Chu Chunyi, takes to religious meditation for comfort and goes to the Sanctuary of Three Immortals by the West Lake to continue her study. The sanctuary was originally built by the emperor to commemorate the fox spirit who rescued Dehua from losing her life. Later Dehua and Shaoxia also return to the temple to study alchemy.

Reminiscent of the scene in which Lijun composes a poem before leaving her parents, Yunxian leaves two poems before she becomes an immortal, one for her parents, the other for Dehua. The poems go as follows:

First:
Borrowing your eminent lodging, I lived twenty years;  
This heart of mine is not tainted by even a speckle of dust.  
Only that I know the transcendent pleasures of the clouds, water, fog, and dawn light,  
Without pursuing the romantic affinity with the wind, flower, snow, and moon.  
Without being involved in trivial matters, one cannot have a life in the world;  
Those who can explore and decipher their own destinies can ascend to the immortal world.  
Now that I ride the crane and return to the mountains,  
Hope my parents treasure their own wellbeing and do not suffer from the loss.  

At the back of the poem is written, "The unfilial daughter Xucai, with a hundred bows, composes with caution for her parents' gracious viewing."

Second:
For three years we lived in harmony and had our wishes fulfilled,  
I believe you understand my intentions.  
Meticulously and diligently, I pursue Dao like the female immortal Wang Miaoxiang,  
Out of the ordinary, I do not imitate the acts of the reincarnated goddess Du Lanxiang.  
With respect I follow the demand of heaven and leave from now on,
and send my words to women in the Golden Chambers to forsake grieving. In another day I shall come to fetch you, holding a sacred flag. In the depths of white clouds, we shall fly together with full freedom. At the back of the poem is written, "Your humble elder sister Xie, leaving this poem to commemorate her departure; please immediately show it to my kind younger sister Dehua. Hope the viewer gives me gracious understanding by not disclosing this poem to others." (8: 30, 1437)

The above represents a scenario comparable to the scene in which Lijun composes a poem on her self-portrait before leaving her parents and cross-dressing to flee from home. In Qiu's adaptation, Yunxian pursues an ideal of transcendental subjectivity through Daoism, and is an alternate self to the heroine Dehua. The first poem, addressed to the parents, shows Yunxian's determination to pursue Daoist study instead of romance and marriage. In the first two lines, Yunxian describes herself as one born with a celestial root, bound to return to the immortal world after borrowing shelter with her parents in her short ethereal journey. Her practice of spiritual alchemy also justifies her moral integrity and filial intentions, although she could not serve her parents personally until the end of their lives. The second poem, addressed to Dehua, evokes the legendary immortals as precursory examples for her pursuit. Wang Miaoxiang (王妙想) is a legendary figure who practices the art of pigu (辟穀), or spontaneous fasting, in the Huangting Monastery by Mount Hengshan in Hunan and later ascends to the immortal world (Li, Fang, Taiping guangji, juan 61, hui 6). Du Lanxiang (杜蘭香) is a legendary fairy lady who is punished for misdeeds by having to descend to earth, who later returns to heaven (see Li Fang, Taiping yulan). Both allusions in Yunxian's second poem suggest that Yunxian will function as a mediator between heaven and earth, and assist Dehua's ultimate return to the immortal realm in the future. The instructive note after the poem indicates a gentry woman's exceptional caution that the poem is a private message to a designated viewer only, and that the heavenly mandate shall not be viewed in public.

These two poems offer a perception of Yunxian's practice beyond that of asceticism, portraying her as a transcendent subject beyond the male/female gender categories, in-between the ethereal and the sanctified. The ending lines carry an embedded narrative prolepsis, "a narrative maneuver that consists in narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place" (Genette, Narrative 40), and suggest Daoist transcendence as the final ending of the tanci. It is also worth scrutiny that Qiu revises the scene in which Lijun makes a self-portrait of her female self before cross-dressing. However, in Bishenghua, after Yunxian ascends to heaven, Dehua takes up her painting brush to make a portrait of her so that a statue of Yunxian can be made and honored at the Sanctuary of Three Immortals. Whereas Lijun's portrait in Zaishengyuan is possessed by the lovesick Shaohua and becomes an object of male desire, Yunxian's portrait is made to commemorate her moral purity, suggesting the author's rectification of the plot to emphasize the propriety in repurposing the beauty portrait. Parallel to these examples of immortal spirits, the story also depicts several examples of vicious women who are reincarnated from animal spirits or reborn to
pay the price for their misconduct in previous lives. An example is the Shaoxia's ferocious concubine Wo Lianggui, the daughter of a middle-ranking official. In her previous life, Wo Lianggui was a female wolf who attacked Shaoxia. The two are destined to re-encounter each in this life as husband and wife. A ravenous wife, Wo assaults Shaoxia when he is in adversity, ridiculing his poverty and frail appearance. When the cross-dressed Dehua visits their household, Wo is immediately attracted to the prime minister's handsome appearance and eminent position and even attempts to seduce Dehua. Because of her erroneous behavior and persistent assault on Shaoxia and even Shaoxia's sister, Wo is locked up in private in the Wen household and finally suffers death in childbirth. Before her death, she dreams of her deceased father, who, himself a wandering ghost repenting from his sinful deeds in life, reveals to Wo her misconduct and her doomed fate.

Qiu's portrayal of the fox spirit and female immortals represents Daoist self-cultivation as a means of self-elevation for both the alien kind in nature and human beings who were born with a celestial bond. Qiu illustrates the heroine's cross-dressing as initiated and facilitated by the compassionate fox spirit, and relies on the power of the fantastic to exempt the heroine from possible moral culpability due to her cross-dressing. This plot arrangement, in addition to adding a supernatural flair to the story to enchant the readers, reflects a late imperial trend of women's fascination with and practice of popular religions that were considered allowable by orthodox society and harmless to feminine virtue. By depicting the fox spirit as a Daoist immortal and mentor, the author breaks down the boundaries between human, beast, and immortal and opens up new spaces for imaginary subjective positions for women in the inner chambers. Also, by employing Yunxian as a double of Dehua and portraying her pursuit of spiritual alchemy, the author foreshadows the heroine's eventual transcendence of earthly bonds through Daoist pursuits, and thus envisions the heroine's final achievement of autonomy without bearing the reproach of breaking the orthodox moral values of filial piety and gender propriety. If narrative motifs such as fox spirits and female immortals are symptomatic of the marvelous and fantastic, such narratives work in Qiu's tanci mostly repeat and reinforce the moral of the story: that a filially devoted women will always be rewarded with a good fate, and that the good and just shall triumph over the evil and shrewd.

Qiu's tanci, in conclusion, could be considered a didactic adaptation of Zaishengyuan, recounted by an ethically self-reflexive feminine author. Qiu's authorial insertions orchestrate a dramatized storyteller who endeavors to tell a morally sound tale and guide the readers' reception of the story. This authorial persona is distinctively gendered as feminine and situated in the context of the history of women's writing, a context which both empowers Qiu with a feminine legacy of writing in dynastic eras and displays the constraint on women's speech in the orthodox and male-centered social environment. Though the plot and characters of Bishenghua are much indebted to Zaishengyuan, Qiu's tanci is far more intricate than an actual sequel. Rather, by arranging the cross-dressed heroine's return to the inner chambers, Qiu demonstrates how the adventurous Dehua transforms and reclaims the domestic
sphere as a space of feminine agency and authority. Eager to exempt her protagonist from the accusation of being overtly ambitious, Qiu creates a fox spirit Hu Yuexian, who represents the force of supernatural intervention and assists Dehua in taking a male disguise. Here, the fantastic impulse in the story, though ostensibly transgressive, serves as a moralistic rationale for the heroine's cross-dressing and thus offers an ethical shield for the virtuous heroine. Dissimilar to Zaishengyuan, which ends with Lijun's impending death under the emperor's tyrannous pressure, Bishenghua offers an alternative closure in which the heroine becomes immortal through Daoist practice and hence achieves true transcendence. This imaginary ending, echoing the title of the book Blossom from the Brush, suggests the novel's own verisimilitude (that is, its fictional kernel), and ironizes the author's realistic compromises in plot development and characterization.