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

Guo, Li

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Chapter Three
Ethics, Filial Piety, and Narrative Sympathy in
Mengyingyuan (Dream, Image, Destiny)

If storytelling frequently involves putting forth a narrative that rewards the virtuous and punishes the villainous, such a convention of poetic justice certainly becomes reconfigured when an author inserts a powerfully gender-conscious voice in the narrative. This is compellingly represented in the seminal tanci work, Mengyingyuan (Dream, Image, Destiny; preface dated 1843), by Zheng Danruo (鄭澹若, 1811-1860). Zheng states in her insertion in the text, "My writing brush is accustomed to articulate anger against injustice, / The Jingwei bird who fills the sea with pebbles has a most resolute heart. / Voicing agony and regret for my precursors, / I shall eliminate vice and malevolence, and widely execute regulation" (2: 20, 104). This passage foregrounds an authorial narrator who executes her writing in comportment with moral principles and displays her determination through an empathetic identification with the legendary bird Jingwei (精衛), an ancient symbol of feminine heroism. In Mengyingyuan, this authorial narrative voice conjures up empathetic identifications with the fictional characters by articulating their feelings through her own voice. Narrative empathy is central to this work and to its social and political interventions in the predominant discourse of the time. Authorial statements in this tanci explicate Zheng's profound anxiety about the social and cultural turmoil of the late Qing dynasty and her persistent struggle to create a space for self-expression. Zheng's epic undertaking in tanci gives prominence to women's self-inscription through writing and projects women authors' possibility of participating in social, cultural, and historical-structural transformations.

Zheng's tanci commences with a predestined relationship between two heavenly spirits, Kuifang Xianzi (魁芳仙子, Premium Flower Goddess) and Mengyin Zhenren (夢隱真人, Dream-Concealed Deity). The two heavenly spirits are summoned by the heavenly emperor to descend to earth to lead the scholar Zhuang of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) in his ascension to the immortal world. The emperor demands that Dream-Concealed Deity enter the world and be reincarnated as Mengyu, the son of the Zhuang family. When Mengyu grows up, he will take the place of his
father and serve his country and emperor. Together with the twelve flower goddesses, Premium Flower Goddess and the Dream-Concealed Deity descend to present the principles through personal practices in order to instruct people in the world (1: 1, 3). The main plot line then follows the family of the reincarnated immortal Zhuang Yuan (莊淵), who descends to the world during the Song dynasty. After serving the emperor with dedication for many years, Zhuang resigns from his position, to avoid conflict with a treacherous high official. He retreats to his home in the countryside with his wife, Mrs. Zhuang, a highly talented woman who also happens to be the reincarnated Premium Flower Goddess and the leader of the twelve flower goddesses. Zhuang’s son Zhuang Mengyu (莊夢玉), who is originally the Dream-Concealed Deity, comes down to the world to redress social customs. The Plum Goddess, who shares a predestined bond with Mengyu and follows him to earth, is born into Lin's family, carrying the name of Lin Xianyu. When Xianyu's father General Lin Wu (林武) meets Zhuang Yuan and becomes his friend, he arranges a union of the two reincarnated deities. The tales of the other flower goddesses overlap with Lin and Zhuang's romance. Each of these goddesses possesses an exceptional talent or has an outstanding virtue. The major plotline develops around Zhuang Mengyu and two other flower goddesses, Lin Xianyu (林纖玉) and Song Renfang (宋紉芳), both of whom marry Mengyu to fulfill a preordained relationship.

Zheng's exhilarating endeavor to startle and transform readers through her story suggests that upper class women in mid Qing enjoyed the aspiration of expressing themselves and reaching to readers outside the inner chambers. Like the prior tanci author Chen Duansheng, Zheng was a member of the gentry class. Her father was a vice censor-in-chief in the government (Hu, Wenkai 740). She was born in Wucheng county of Zhejiang province in the early nineteenth century. In Zheng's early years, she established her fame as a poet under the name of Zheng Zhenhua (鄭貞華), meaning "flower of chastity." Before composing her tanci, she completed a poetry collection, 綠飲樓詩遺 (Lüyinlou shiyi, Remained Poems of the Green Water Pavilion), which was published around 1833 (Hu, Wenkai 740). Later, she became known as a master of tanci. A literary critic of Zheng's time commented on her outstanding tanci and her augmentation of women's writing: "Zheng Danruo wrote the renowned Mengyingyuan, which stood out with its erudition, splendid style, and refined diction, and consequently brought about a transformation of the genre of tanci" (Bao 269).

Zheng's literary achievement is attested to by her extensive poetry exchanges with other women of the time. These poems provide some of the little biographical information that remains about her. For example, Wang Yaofen (王瑤芬), who was a close female friend and a family relative of Zheng, had several poems referring to Zheng in 寫頌樓詩鈔 (Xieyunlou shichao, Poetry Collections of the Rhyme Composition Pavilion). Zheng's daughter Zhou Yingfang married Wang Yaofen's son (Bao 269). Some of the poems dedicated to her by her women friends also shed some light on her literary reputation and style of writing. In a poem composed for the celebration of Zheng's birthday, the poet Yan Yonghua (嚴永華), who was a close friend of
Zheng's comments that she had long known that Zheng's "magic brush was born with an immortal spirit" (Yan 1.10a). Yan honored Zheng as nüzongshi (女宗師), the woman master in poetry, and in comparison called herself a shidizi (詩弟子), a poetry disciple. These references attest to the author's poetic talent, which is consequently displayed in the large amount of poetry and verse games in Mengyingyuan.

Regarding Zheng's poetry collection Green Water Pavilion, a poem dedicated to Zheng from a later woman poet notes, "Her chaste spirit, together with her poetry collection Green Water Pavilion, left no traces" (Chen Yun 23b). The poem, punning on Zheng's formal name Zhenhua (貞華), that is, chaste flower, suggests that the poet did not leave many poems after her tragic suicide in 1860.

This suicide, which is probably the most important piece of extant biographical information, can be contextualized with the mass suicide of women that occurred during the Taiping Rebellion, a social upheaval that nearly overthrew the late Qing government. When the rebels occupied the southern cities, local residents were forced to leave their families and live in separate camps for men and women. As their domestic lives were shattered, many women of the gentry class committed suicide to defend their chastity. Zheng's husband was the head official of Hangzhou when the rebels broke into the city in 1860. Probably to preserve her chastity, Zheng committed suicide by taking poison. For late imperial women, "once the boundaries of the chaste body, the virtuous reputation, the proper interaction, or the inner quarters had been violated, only a publicly known and violent vindication of the chastity that was destroyed could restore the moral integrity that was integral to so many women's sense of self" (Theiss 134). Zheng's death might be understood as an attempt to express her selfhood in a shattered society by the spectacle of suicide.

As Susan Mann suggests, scholars of Qing women's literature in the late nineteenth century should "draw a line between the writings of women who lived through the Taiping Rebellion, and those who never experienced it" ("The Lady and the State" 313). Whereas some women authors who survived the tragic incident were able to write reflective poems on their traumatic experiences, Zheng's death in the Taiping attack situates her and her tanci in a crucial historical time which precedes a profound change of women's literary production caused by traumatic historical transformation. Tobie Meyer-Fong, in her 2013 book, points out that during the Taiping Rebellion, the massive number of suicides committed by women who drowned themselves at the fall of Hangzhou was testified to by records of foreign missionaries who witnessed the tragedy and to whom such a phenomenon possibly represented a form of moral violence. However "for a nineteenth-century Chinese observer," such event "is meant to be read as the expression of collective virtue, the fulfillment of an obligation entailed by fundamental human relationships and thus an act worthy of commemoration and official honors" (Meyer-Fong 119-20).

The cult of female chastity in the late imperial period has caught the attention of many critics. Wenjing Lu offers valuable research on Ming and Qing faithful maidens, that is, betrothed women whose fiancés died before marriage, but who maintained lifelong chastity or committed suicide to join their "husbands" in death.
Lu proposes that these faithful maidens, rather than becoming passive victims of oppression, were active agents who appropriated the Confucian ethical codes to assert their sense of identity (Lu, Wenjing, True to Her Word 247; Mann, "Widows" 37-56). Corresponding with the author's personal demonstration of moral integrity, Zheng's tanci manifests the widespread moral concern with chastity and filial piety which formed the basis of feminine heroism (see Hinsch 169-204). Feminine virtue is evoked and reinforced by her authorial insertions and comments at the beginning of the chapters, which is a stylistic feature of many tanci. Zheng's women characters manifest acts of chastity as a form of resistance. While they are faithful unmarried maidens who commit suicide in the name of reuniting with their deceased fiancés, they also reject marriage in the name of preserving their filially pious service to their parents. When the heroines are forced to marry under the pressure of their natal families, they commit suicide to preserve their sexual and moral purity. The heroines assert their own moral value by actively appropriating the Confucian cult of chastity, revealing the profound social, cultural, and psychological meaning of women's suicide in this era.

One of the earliest remaining versions of the text was an illustrated lithographed edition in 1895 by publisher Zhujianzhai in Hangzhou, with the author's self-preface dated 1843 (Hu, Wenkai 740). The text threads together the individual stories of the goddesses through intricate plot manipulation. The author stresses four basic virtues for human beings, including 孝 (xiao, filial devotion), 忠 (zhong, loyalty), 節 (jie, chastity), and 烈 (lie, uncorrupted purity), which are presented through the unusual deeds of the twelve reincarnated goddesses. Almost all the women characters resist marriage and express the wish to stay unmarried to enact their filial duties to their own parents. Unlike in the cult of widow suicide or faithful maiden suicide, many reincarnated women characters pass away in illness or regret before they are arranged to be married by force. This kind of death before marriage or even engagement reveals the author's modification of the notion of chastity in the Confucian moral system. Women's moral integrity is presented as a spiritual agency which is of higher importance than her obligation to her parents, her husband, or her in-laws.

In accounting tales of extraordinary heroines, Zheng frequently intervenes in the narrative, affirming the heroic deeds of fictional characters and even speaking on their behalf in internal monologues. The tension and reciprocal influence between character depiction and authorial self-representation can be traced to the title of the work, Mengyingyuan (Dream, Image, Destiny). In this tanci, characters often dream of others or their previous lives. The "dream" is a narrative strategy frequently used to embed and tell stories from the characters' perspectives. Also, dream is a metaphor in motion and is analogous to the narration process in which the authorial narrator connects the "fragmented snapshots" of the characters' tales, imposes structure to the text, or expresses her "waking thoughts" by speaking directly to the audience (Kilroe 2000). The word "image," by contrast, represents characters depicted in the text. David Rolston observes that a narrative strategy in late imperial fiction is shexing quying (舍形取影), that is, "letting go of the
outward body in favor of its images." This is often the intention of the author, who, when depicting characters in the book, begins from their mirrored images rather than from their speaking selves (Rolston, *How to Read* 329). Zheng, regarding this intriguing relation between "form" and "image," suggests that "the form is not much different from its image, sending out fragrance before my sense comes to it" (Zheng, Preface). If the "form" represents the authorial power over fictional characters, Zheng's interpretation implies an identifiable relation between the form and the image, between the authorial speaking self and the fictional characters. A close reading of *Mengyingyuan*, in this sense, moves the reader deeper into the empathetic relationships between the authorial voice, the character's viewpoint, and the reader's engaged gaze that beholds the characters.

In Zheng's *Mengyingyuan*, the narrative voice shifts between the first-person narrative voice and the third-person narrative voice. As a result, the distance between the narrator and the story world becomes dynamic and changeable. Zheng's authorial narrator asserts a voice of "I" at the beginning and ending of each chapter, dexterously mediating between the multiple embedded narratives. The positions of the authorial narrator in the multifarious narrative lead the reader to question the shifting boundaries between the authorial narrator, the fictional character, and the actual author. The first-person authorial insertions demonstrate the relation between *tanci* works and some subgenres in China's vernacular fiction. The beginning lines by the narrator in each chapter are reminiscent of the so-called *meipi* (眉批) or "eye-brow note" in Ming and Qing printed fiction, which is inserted in a margin above the text and consists of simulated handwritten comments to deliver a personal message related to the text (Brokaw and Chow 284). However, in *tanci*, women authors' comments are written as part of the texts and often provide rich self-reflections and autobiographical information. The unique narrative authority given to the feminine authorial narrator in such a stylistic arrangement is discussed in current scholarship on the narrative points of view in late imperial fiction. Liang Xiaoping states that there are three major narrative perspectives in Ming and Qing domestic fiction, including "omniscient hetero-diegetic narrative perspective," "limited narrative perspective attached to a fictional character," and "pure objective narrative perspective" (Liang, Xiaoping 170). In Zheng's text, the first-person voice reveals the connection between *tanci* and vernacular storyteller fiction in which the authorial voice appears in the prologue, opening, and ending sessions with criticism and direct address to the readers. Zheng's narrator may occupy a position akin to what Liang calls "omniscient hetero-diegetic narrative perspective," but by itself also signifies an ongoing paratext to the main body of the *tanci*. The inserted lines by the author in fiction is not unique to *tanci*. David Rolston suggests that in Qing, "it became standard for longer works of vernacular fiction in the literati mode to contain opening and closing sections in which the author (or implied author) spoke more directly to the reader than in the bulk of the text. Under the influence of *Honglou meng*, the prologue sections of many nineteenth-century and late Qing novels are written in the first person" (Rolston, "Points of View" 123).
Rolston's observation recalls writer Li Yü's story collection 無聲戲 (Wusheng xi, Silent Operas) in late Ming, in which Li speaks explicitly to the readers in the opening and closing sessions. The application of first-person narration in the opening and closing sessions is not rare in Ming and Qing vernacular literature. A prominent example is Rouputuan (The Carnal Prayer Mat) by Li. The author robes his vivid descriptions about sexuality with didactic moralization, claiming in the prologue that his purpose in writing a book about the hero's sexual adventures is to intrigue the readers with outrageous incidents and then to insert moralistic criticism to startle them. A compelling example is Wu Jianren's novel 二十年目睹之怪現狀 (Ershinian mudu zhi guai xianzhuang, Strange Things Observed over the Past Twenty Years; 1905). Hanan states that the earliest use of the first-person pronoun was in 悔罪之大略 (Huizui zhi daelu, A Treatise on Repentance, 1839), a tract by the missionary Karl Gützlaff that takes the form of a Chinese novel told by an "I" narrator ("The Missionary Novels" 165). Zheng’s Mengyingyuan, however, precedes A Treatise on Repentance by over half a century in making use of a first-person narrative frame.

Aside from these tradition-breaking examples of the first-person narrative voice in fiction, Ming and Qing memoirs might have influenced Zheng's writing in other ways. In these memoirs, the narrator is often a main character or the witness of an event and accounts the events from a personal point of view. Examples include the Ming novel 癡婆子傳 (Chipozi zhuan, Memoir of a Crazy Old Woman) by Furong Zhuren (芙蓉主人), the Qing novel 影梅庵憶語 (Yingmei’an yiyü, Memoir of the Shadow Plum Pavilion) by Mao Xiang (冒襄, 1611-1693), and 浮生六記 (Fusheng liuji, Six Records of a Floating Life, 1809) by Shen Fu (沈復, 1763-1825), which is a blend of autobiography, love story, and social document (Liang, Xiaoping 170). Likewise, personal narrative perspective is prominent in many tanci, when the authors insert their speaking voices into the beginning and end of each juan (scroll or volume) and hui (chapter), describing their lives in the inner chambers and commenting on characters and events. In such situations, the narrator's voice is personal and occasionally dramatized, as in a memoir. The authorial narrator is heterodiegetic; rather than participating in the plot, the narrator recounts the development of the plot from a distance.

This narrating "I" in tanci at the beginning and closing lines of each chapter offers a rare case that has not been sufficiently examined in narratological studies of the first-person voice, since written tanci borders on fiction, drama, and oral narratives, and more often than not foregrounds a distinctively feminine authorial narrator. Zheng’s Mengyingyuan revives "the situation of live communication between the storyteller and the audience," and thereby creates spaces of sharing and exchanges characteristics of live communication (Brooks, Reading 99). This simulation of orality in writing offers a compelling case for the study of women's narrative enunciation, when the female author self-consciously plays with narrative tactics. One may suggest that Zheng is confronted with the slippage between "woman" as a signifier defined by male discourses in history and "women" as individual subjects devoted
to the transformation of social and historical discourses through writing and reading. The narrating "I," constructed as a female authorial presence, represents a form of self-empowerment through speaking. In *Mengyingyuan* and many *tanci* works, it is a woman, rather than a man, who plays the role of the authoritative enunciator.

In depicting her female characters, the author relies on creating ideals of filial virtue and chastity as moral paradigms. The authorial narrator claims, "My sole concern is to sweep away the abominable thoughts in people's minds, and wash out a copious space of pure sentiment in their minds. Filial piety, justice, loyalty, and chastity are all most honest qualities; even sentimental writings should appeal to pure feelings" (1: 1, 1). Zheng's endorsement of filial devotion finds expression through the male characters Zhuang Yuan and his son, Zhuang Mengyu, both of whom aspire to flee to the heavenly realm to enjoy reunion with their immortal ancestors. The quality of loyalty is highlighted in the male protagonists' faithful service to the emperor and in the servants' loyal caring for the Zhuang family. Bret Hinsch proposes that the emergence of female chastity was closely tied to the honor culture of early Chinese masculinity (169-204). Zheng also creates new varieties of chastity by depicting women who would lose their lives in order to keep their virginal innocence rather than submit to forceful marriage arrangements. Chastity becomes both a moral register and a new model for feminine subjectivity.

A reverberating example of filial passion appears in the *tanci* as well. The reincarnated immortal Zhuang Mengyu, in order to cure his ailing father, resorts to his innate magical powers to transfer the father's illness to himself. In her comments on Mengyu's filial act, the author evokes the concern with 情 (*qing*, emotions) in contemporary vernacular fiction, but offers an innovative interpretation of *qing* in light of loyalty and filial piety. She comments on Mengyu's sacrificial action to save his father: "The most profound human emotions are loyalty and filial piety. Only in being devoted children and faithful officials can human beings have these feelings. Who then is the leading figure in the field of sentiments? The most devoted one is a person of faithful and filial passions" (1: 7, 95). In contrast to the sensualized interpretation of *qing* as romantic love or even sexual passion in some Ming and Qing popular novels, Zheng holds that only those who implement filially devoted and loyal actions have the "purest *qing.*" Subsequently Zheng asserts her own moral integrity and self-cultivation. Richard Davis states that the appropriation of *qing* by disenfranchised literati might be a means to assert their status as *shi* (scholars) (206). This is an indication of the interest in *qing* in the literati culture of late Ming and early Qing, 100 years before *Mengyingyuan* was written. Answering to this existing tradition, the authorial narrator offers an inventive interpretation of *qing* as an emotive expression of sincerity and moral purity. "The song of 'The Calling Ospreys' initiates the rituals and customs [in the matter of marriage], / only chaste emotions can be expressed through words. / A beautiful lady should marry a gentleman, / even though he is sleepless because of longing for her; it is understandable. / [In some cases,] one may have a friend with the same heart, / and should not carelessly search for another lover" (1: 11, 157).
Chapter Three

The song "關雎" ("guanjü," "The Calling Ospreys") alludes to a song of the same name which is placed first in The Book of Odes (1046-771 BCE) because of its influence to transform and normalize human relations and feelings in the institution and rituals of marriage (Deng Xiang 1: 1). Qing or "chaste emotions" is in Mengyingyuan explicitly interpreted as an emotive bond between the companions, based on sincerity and chaste feelings for each other. Chastity, rather than desire, is emphasized as a determining component of qing. The narrator's moralistic concerns are presented in her female characters, who are virtuous women. When the reincarnated goddess Lin Xianyu sees that her aging mother-in-law, Mrs. Zhuang, loses her beauty, Lin prays in private to be able to compromise her own beauty and lifespan to redeem Mrs. Zhuang's good looks. The narrator, in her comments on Xianyu's filial act, evokes 勸孝歌 (Quanxiao ge, A Song to Persuade People to Be Filially Pious), a popular pedagogical text for children in Weixin county in the southern Yunnan province. It was composed by a Qing scholar Xu Xin in the mid-nineteenth century. In the text the author states, "The most moving text is A Song for Filial Piety; / how on earth could people understand the meaning of it? / When the wife is as beautiful as jade, the mother's looks have declined to that of dust. / Who could have taken up this filial intention again?" (4: 43,125). Only the most thoughtful children can sympathize with the parents. In describing Xianyu, the narrator notes that using her magical power to decrease her own beauty and to redeem Mrs. Zhuang's looks is "an imaginary and exceptional incident; / I would allow others to laugh at my speculative description" (4: 43, 125). Zheng's depiction of the heroine can be understood in light of chaste women depicted in Chinese history and literary writings. These writings belong to "an elite discourse on chastity" and are male presentations of idealized women (Mann, "Widows" 40). In the writings about "notable women," these chaste and filially devoted women are often "stripped of their personal traits," and their lives are reduced to simplistic moral categories of good or evil in ways that were almost ahistorical (Davis 206). In comparison with the dispassionate, and almost "stoically virtuous" women in some didactic texts (Davis 206), Zheng's depiction of Xianyu suggests her personal affections and may elicit an emotional response from readers.

In Zheng's text, some women also make claims of filial piety to justify their persistence in virginity and the renunciation of marriage, because not marrying allows daughters to stay home and serve their parents. Virginity is an exceptional case of women's virtue, surpassing chastity by its complete rejection of sexual desire. In her preface, Zheng criticizes the writings of her time which lose their uniqueness by pursuing popular themes of love and romance and fame and fortune. She claims that her purpose is to counterbalance some morally corrupting "scholar and beauty" romances with tales of women who preserve their virginity and moral virtue. She notes, "[in my work] the unrivaled scholar with poetic sensibilities shall follow the example of the unaffected Liu Xiahui [who avoids sexual craving]. A couple who hold a true understanding of each other would still emulate the virtuous Liu Xiahui, who guards their wills against sexual temptations, and maintains their virginity as the Children of the North Palace" (author's preface). The quote refers to Liu Xiahui
(柳下惠, 720 BCE-621 BCE), a model of moral integrity. Once Liu was traveling in a remote area and met a woman who asked to stay at his place on a cold day. Liu, concerned that the woman might not be able to resist the cold weather, held her in his arms and covered her body with his clothes. Throughout the night he did not make any offensive move toward her (Hu, Bingwen 190). Another reference is to the beigong ying (北宮嬰), or Infant of the North Palace, which refers to women who take vows of lifelong virginity. Beigong, the North Palace, or the queen's palace, is an allusion to parents. Beigong ying or "infant of the North Palace" indicates devoted daughters, according to a story about 嬰兒子 (Ying'er zi, Infant Girl), a daughter in the State of Qi (齊, 1046 BCE-221 BCE), who never married in order to serve her parents (Liu Xiang, Zhan'guoce 11: 6-8). Most women in Mengyingyuan never enter into marriage and instead express their wish to live a consecrated life in the name of serving their natal parents. When they are forced to marry, some protest by suicide or illness. As the text goes, "all the chaste wives and filially pious daughters have sacrificed their lives to preserving their integrity; such a family custom of loyalty and filial piety could hardly find a match in any household" (4: 46, 197). Although the main couple, Mengyu and Xianyu, ties the knot in the end, the wife has solemnly dedicated to lifetime virginity and avoids sexual intimacy with her husband. As the preface portrays, Zheng's insistence on women's virginity is potentially transformative and emancipatory. The Confucian notion of women's chastity emphasizes the married widows' abstinence from sexual desire. Nonetheless, women's vows of lifetime virginity openly renounce marriage, which enmeshes women's social identity in the family system, placing upon them an obligation to produce the next generation of their husbands' lineage.

The question of chastity and fidelity in Zheng's text points to the conundrum of authorial ethics, which is reflected in the narrator's extensive observations on the challenges of being a writer. Zheng laments, "Allowing bad writing to circulate is as harmful as committing a murder without leaving a trace." She stresses a writer's responsibility to articulate truth and improve society: "I put all my heart into composing [this] work. Those exceptionally perceptive will see the purpose of my writing" (author's preface). The author claims her right to a cultural voice, yet she remains uncertain of the influence of her work when transmitted, edited, and circulated through the publication business. Authorial ethics displays a charged dilemma between the private and public worlds of the woman tanci writer. Such ethical concern is manifested in the author's awareness of her moral responsibility to awaken and inspire her readers. Zheng explains in the preface, "I wish to strike the morning bell and the night drum, and with every beat stir lost souls; in the bright and aromatic hues [of language]), every word must be filled with bitter tears." This passionate self-expression is in tune with the opening of the novel, The Dream of the Red Chamber, by Cao Xueqin: "Pages full of idle words, / penned with hot and bitter tears. / All men call the author fool. / None his secret message hears" (3). Pervaded by irony, the authorial lament in Cao's text exposes the incommensurable distance between the author and his imagined readers. Zheng's preface presents similar emotional expressions
of the authorial narrator, but it also carries a distinctive ethical appeal, establishing the credibility of the author and calling on the reader's moral judgment. Dorothy Ko observes that late imperial women authors were extremely creative in crafting a space from within the prevailing gender system that gave them meaning, solace, and dignity (Ko, Teachers 9). This authorial tactic of creating a space for self-expression perhaps provides the ground for Zheng's explicit claim of rewriting history through her personal literary practice. In Zheng's *tanci*, the amplified opening and closing passages articulate the reinforced narrative voice of a feminine subject who vigorously brings together the collected voices of talented women in her words. The author notes,

As a woman I am filled with anger against injustice; my heart does not take change over time.
While writing history I review the story three times and would not carelessly write false facts.
Don't say that wine can wash away this regret in my heart.
To dissolve the sorrows one has to put them into words.
I will avenge for the upright and the honest in ancient times, retrace their cases and obliterate the evil ones.
How amusing that such a task cannot be accomplished by a substitute, only those involved in such situations have the power to exercise transformation. (3: 30, 49)

The text brings forth an explicitly female narrator who tells the audience that justice awaits the villains. The narrator's technique of proclaiming history to the audience makes apparent women authors' anxiety about writing in a literary tradition that is largely created by men. The author stresses the moral responsibility of each individual, or 個中人 (*gezhong ren*, those who are involved) for achieving these demanding tasks. Here, the narrator's voice goes further into a form of emotional self-dramatization: "If people in the world scold me for ridiculous sayings, / why should I argue and explain my true purpose? / Everyone has his own mindset; / it is difficult to reach common understanding with others. / I can only turn toward myself for reassurance" (4: 45, 160). The anguished narrating self of the first-person narrator mirrors the focus of the author's consciousness, offering an illuminating portrayal of the author's struggle against social constraints on her speech.

Zheng's ethical concerns are associated with her intellect, energy, and sense of frustration in the quest for self-articulation. Her lament brings forth a feminine voice which beseeches freedom from socially prescribed gender roles. This voice aspires to leave the secular world and search for a space of freedom and agency:

I have also contemplated leaving behind worldly concerns and escaping into the secluded mountains, concealing my name and hiding my tracks. Only that I was shackled by my life as a woman; despite my ideals, I could not take this journey and can only sigh in regret. Though aware of my situation, I cannot escape fate; never can I flee the material limits.


The chains of karmic bonds cannot be easily shaken off.

Even though my mind and heart are as pure as ice and snow, I cannot but pity myself. (1: 1, 1)

The author's lament over her shackled life as a woman shows an impulse to retreat from worldly affairs reminiscent of late imperial women authors' aspiration for Buddhist beliefs in spiritual transcendence. Critic Lijian Wang states that many talented women poets in the Qing period attributed their miserable lives to the karmic fate of predestination. Wang cites from the poets Wu Zao and Jiang Zhu (江珠), who both displayed their regret for their lives in a patriarchal society and turned to Buddhism to strengthen their purity through meditation. Wang quotes from the female poet Jiang Jixiu (蔣機秀): "If women take to religious meditation and admire Daoist meditation, they are most likely caught in a desperate situation, and do so because of external pressure" (Wang, Lijian 35). Women's despair was often caused by failure in marriage. In many cases, however, women authors expressed discontent with society and their desire for a life of reclusion. Zheng's narration demonstrates the author's dilemma between entering or renouncing the world. The text displays an ironic contrast between the authorial narrator's performative efficacy and Zheng's unviable existence in real life.

The possible influence of religious beliefs in predestination and reincarnation on these women authors can be situated in the late imperial historical and social contexts. In a study of women in eighteenth-century China, Susan Mann argues, "Buddhism and Daoism . . . repositioned Confucian family values for women, enriching the spiritual and emotional existence of motherhood, widowhood, old age and even creating a tiny space where filially pious daughters could refuse marriage entirely" (Mann, Precious Records 200). Mann's comment sheds light on Zheng's filially pious and chaste heroines, who protect their virginity by becoming devotees of established poems of spiritual self-cultivation. Also, the authorial narrator recurrently evokes a religious philosophy of redemption. She laments human mortality and the difficulty of completing her ambitious task. She asks, "Where is the path for regeneration, once my bones disintegrate into powdery dust? / Therefore, I shall make use of this body while it still bears breath, and seek to redeem my mistakes" (1: 1, 1). In the preface the author expresses herself in the present moment, searches for spiritual freedom through writing, and thus enacts a moral position to which she is deeply committed.

Zheng's profound concern over moral propriety opens up considerable space for a study of nineteenth-century female public readership. Literary works of the time allowed scholars to posit a group of women readers that included but was larger than the elite literary circles of the Jiangnan regions. This community of readers might have affected the shape of literary work with protofeminist potentials, such as 鏡花緣 (Jinghuayuan, Flower in the Mirror; 1828) by Li Ruzhen (李汝珍) and Zaizaotian (Remaking Heaven, 1826) by Hou Zhi. Zheng's Mengyingyuan was published in 1843, shortly after these two texts. It is possible that Zheng's moral concerns shore up a tactful authorial choice in meeting the need of her women readers.
This concern with the historical readership of her work might explain some apparent
incongruities in the authorial voice in Mengyingyuan. In the authorial insertions,
the narrator's expressions of personal ambitions and literary aspirations are often
cloaked in modest and self-effacing statements. The author's disposition seems to be
cautiously reconciled with moral instructions concerning virtue and filial devotion.
She says, for example, that "virtuous deeds are foremost in importance, literary tal-
ent secondary" (1: 5, 69), and that "one should by no means boast of unusual literary
talent, but should rely on his filial deeds to move heaven" (1: 5, 69). These remarks
indicate reconciliation with, if not a submission to, the prevailing norms, with a pos-
sible purpose of meeting the demands of women readers. This authorial prudence
also influences her choice of narrative style.

The matter at hand seems fantastic but not a fantasy.
However, when did I ever imitate Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio and
tell eccentric stories?
I talk leisurely about feelings which surface spontaneously in writing;
subtly I imply an intention that comes across to my readers without
misapprehension.
Nonetheless, right and wrong might not have been properly distinguished
in my writing;
and I worry that I cannot completely remove ornamented expressions.
Thus I claim that this is a tale about a filially devoted child and disciple,
hoping to sweep away shallow and commonplace sentimental writings.
(1: 1, 5)

In the above passage, Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio is a collection of
nearly five hundred mostly supernatural tales about fox spirits and ghosts, written
by Pu Songling in classical Chinese during the early eighteenth century. Zheng's
evocation of this text represents her fear of limited efficacy in writing and an invin-
cible sense of social responsibility. The recounted tales of the characters are fantastic
stories; by contrast, the author insists that the basis of her work is filial piety and
loyalty. The fantastic motif in the narrative, she suggests, is adopted to illustrate the
moral rightness of the characters. Unlike the romance stories about fox spirits and
ghosts in Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio, Zheng's text, as she claims, intends
to present emotions with simplicity and propriety, without resorting to "ornamented
language." The "shallow and commonplace sentimental writing" here might refer
to the popular fiction of love and romance in the early nineteenth century. Some of
these writings were condemned as xiaxie xiaoshuo (狹邪小說), or licentious fic-
tion, because of their direct depictions of sexuality and their crude diction. Despite
the government's open censorship, these writings enjoyed great popularity among
less-educated people and even influenced women and children. The moralizing tone
in the narration insinuates Zheng's effort to establish moral and personal integrity
through writing and thereby instruct her selected readers.

Zheng's ethical dilemma about writing, furthermore, is specifically manifested
in her understanding of the controversies about the tanci genre, as well as her choice
of breaking away from the "scholar and beauty" convention in vernacular literature.
She states in her own preface that to restore moral integrity to people's minds, she will distinguish her writing from the conventions of romantic love in popular fiction and take an innovative approach in plot arrangement. Zheng compares the genres of drama, fiction, and *tanci*, and concludes that *tanci* is a particularly accessible genre for her. This passage draws attention to the correlation between Zheng's choice of *tanci* and her literary aspirations, as well as to the mutual fitness of the two. Zheng holds a critical view of the genre of *tanci*. She bewails the deterioration of readers who were under the influence of some *tanci* writings of the time.

I am regretful that casual gift exchange between men and women has caused people's habits to degenerate; *tanci* have fallen into clichéd writing. How could these stories match the tales of those children who dress in colorful clothing, to dance and to entertain their parents? The true feelings of sons and daughters shall prove their filial piety. I regret that these degraded writings are circulated in the inner chambers, making it difficult to distinguish chastity from licentiousness. Hence I will do without the conventions of previous authors, and depict the genuine chastity and pure virtue of women. (2: 15, 37)

Filial piety and chastity are presented as the fundamental standards for good *tanci* fiction, distinguishing Zheng's work from other *tanci* writings on love and romance. Zheng articulates a determination to dispel morally degraded writing and instead to circulate morally instructive writing in the inner quarters. This statement supports the image of a virtuous woman and asserts this author's distinctive literary voice. Also, the passage reveals women authors' ambivalent attitudes toward these fictional genres. As a genre, *tanci* had been considered acceptable to write, although unsuitable for women to publish, until the nineteenth century. In *Mengyingyuan*, Zheng's moralizing tone possibly demonstrates her concern to speak in the right manner to her targeted audience. It seems that only through telling the stories of filially pious and chaste characters could the author truly celebrate her identity as a woman writer.

The narrative *tanci* written by women demonstrate the tension between the social discourse of gender roles and women's desire for a habitable social space. In *Mengyingyuan*, the author's refusal or inability to resolve the tension between these poles produces a narrative intensified by the narrator, whose voice brings forth an explicit appeal for the reader's emotive response. This narrative voice destabilizes the distance between the authorial narrator, the character, and the reader, and draws attention to the ironic aperture between these subjective positions. Zheng's *tanci* foregrounds the explicit narrative voice of a woman, a speaking self who adopts a panoramic view of the fictional world, accessing the thoughts and minds of the talented women characters from an external and elevated perspective. Yet the author's own immediate writing situation drives her to intervene in the story and assert a recurring narrative voice in the text, which partially constitutes the emotive bonds between the readers and the characters as well as the authorial identification with the characters. While the narrator and the readers are both story-sharing creatures, emotional
contagion between these subjective positions becomes crucial in the transmission
and development of the text. Sympathy functions as an empowering experience for
both the author and the readers. Authorial laments about the difficulty of writing
invite the readers' sympathetic understanding of the fictional characters, creating
an emotional bond between the readers and the characters. In Mengyingyuan, the
author's lament and strong empathetic identification with the character is reinforced
by the distinctive first-person narrative voice "wo" (I) and numerous references to
intense emotional expressions such as 嘆 (tan, lament), 傷逝感 (shangshi gan, desolate feelings), 可憐 (kanlian, deserving pity), and 恨 (hen, regret). This form of
passionate emotional expression is especially compelling in the following example.

One of the reincarnated flower goddesses, Liu Lingjuan (劉令娟), becomes
a victim to her cousin's scheme and is forced to marry him by her parents. Enraged
by this injustice, Lingjuan spits blood and dies instantly. Her death is proclaimed as
that of a chaste woman by the narrator, who, seeing the character's calamity, turns to
comment on her personal misfortune. "I sigh that in this life all people have suffered
death and loss. / Pitiable are those of great beauty who pass away at an early age. / I
regret there is no magic brush to capture their images, / and that instead there are
ten thousand thoughts and powerless desires. / Like her I could not forget my own
sisters, and suffered misfortunes, / although our fates are different. / I try to resolve
the dilemma with this cup of wine, only to be filled with more regret" (3: 36, 219).

The dramatized lament on the grief of losing a companion is rendered with
ambiguity in the text, for the lack of a distinctive pronoun in these lines opens up the
space for multiple interpretations. One may ask whose regret is presented here. In a
comparative study of focalization in Western and Chinese narrative theories, Chinese
narratologist Dan Shen argues that in certain cases, although a character's perception
in the narrative belongs to the level of the story, it might also be "adopted by the nar
rator at this moment as a means of transmitting the story" (Dan 232). Additionally,
"in its role as temporary 'angle of vision,' it also takes on a discourse function. . . .
When a character's 'diegetic consciousness' is adopted by the narrator in rendering
the story, it will unavoidably take on a dual nature, constituting at once part of what
is narrated and a means of presentation" (Dan 232). In the above example, the root
for this sentiment of regret is ambivalent. As the narrative lens gradually zooms in on
the authorial narrator's interior world, the text brings out the resonance between the
narrator's lament on the misfortunate woman character and her own personal lament
on the loss of friends in the inner quarters. The text, in this example, suggests the
multiple scales in which narrative sympathy takes place.

The narrator's grievance on separation and loss also illustrates her split sense
of self, which underlies her overt appeal to an implied readership. Specifically, the
text demonstrates an intimate, personal connection between the authorial narrator
and readers in the boudoir, who are repetitively invoked and deeply inscribed in the
text. The function of the reader/narratee is meaningful because it exists on the same
diegetic level as the authorial narrator. This dialectical relationship between the au-
thorial narrator and her targeted audience is presented in the following passage.
Please do not complain about the many exclamations in the story; it is truly because of the difficulty to convert people's hearts. If I were to use my tongue carelessly, I would certainly suffer false accusations, for I am not good at words myself. Yet if there are some friends in the boudoir who will appreciate my story, they will confirm that my words are not far-fetched and imaginary. Since ancient times, the legend of Zhong Ziqi and Bo Ya's friendship has been widely applauded; to imitate them, I started composing this book. . . . Exposing my amateurish writing to experts in literature, I might only make them have a good laugh. If writing is uninspired, how can it be passed down? I don't mind being considered an unabashed imitator, for the word sincerity is not necessarily outdated. (1: 13, 204)

The authorial narrator addresses the narratee and pleads for sympathy. She expresses concern over her right to write, talking to her readers, the intrafictional addressee of her discourse. The authorial narrator tells the story in a humbled, confessional tone but also maintains that she is well educated and is a competent writer. She is actively engaged with the projected audience, her "friends in the boudoir"; their relationship is an intimate, personal one, and is frequently invoked to support the authorial narrator. She later states, "If my clumsy brush composes a witty work, it depends on the outstanding talents of my friends who themselves are experts in writing poetry. / I will rely on you my readers to revise my rough lines into refined texts, / so that they can be circulated widely in the inner chambers" (2: 16, 53). Here Zheng might be referring to the womanly practice of hand copying tanci and circulating them in the inner chambers. This group of friends in the inner chambers is akin to a fictional character who listens to the narrator's story, even though the narrator is not active on the plot level and exists only "offstage." The authorial insertions, in these situations, elicit ample interplay between authorial and readerly sympathy.

While the narrator starts the tale by presenting a panoramic perspective of society and history, the narrative always comes to a point where the narrator is engaged in a sympathetic relationship with the characters in the story. When the male protagonist Zhuang Yuan, a descendent of the immortals, decides to leave the world and return to the heavenly realm, Zhuang's close friend Lin Wu (林武) is overwhelmed with sorrow over his departure. In the closing lines of this chapter, the author is so profoundly moved by the plot that she laments on her own separation from friends: "At this instant I could not continue writing, / dismayed by the fact that the few friends I have are scattered to other parts of the world. / Even though there are a few really intimate friends, / we cannot see each other anymore because of death or distance" (2: 16, 53). From this lament on the loss of her friends in life, the author continues to address an imaginary group of readers, who might be sympathetic to her personal experience.

When emotions are harnessed, regret grows; one becomes impulsive, laughing, talking, singing, or weeping.
To overpraise a person is no less than to degrade him; shall I meet my female friends again, it is difficult to find appropriate words. With this cup of wine I hope to dispel my regrets, my untainted heart finds articulation at the tip of the writing brush. When my story is compiled by dear friends, it will have the luck to attract their perceptive eyes and make them understand my mind. (2: 16, 53)

In these lines, the correspondence between "my pure heart" and "perceptive eyes" demonstrates the mutual dependence of the writer and the reader. The text presents a dialectic relationship between the author and audience; in the reader's reciprocation the text takes it fullest shape. This moment demonstrates the imaginary relationship between reader and writer when a reader interprets a text. In the cited passage, the narrator's lament on the loss of personal friends is gradually replaced with a longing for a sympathetic readership. By fostering an imagined community of sympathetic readers, the author empowers the articulation of her literary identity.

The theme of narrative sympathy in traditional Chinese fiction and drama is addressed as 設身處地 (sheshen chudi, putting oneself in another's case). David Rolston notes that this practice of imaginary identification with characters (historical or not) different from oneself is a facility very important to creative work in fiction or drama (Rolston, How to Read 25). "Imagining oneself in the situation of the other" produces an important situation of sympathy. Min Tian, in a study of traditional theatrical performances, notes that sheshen chudi means for the performing artist "to forget that he is acting and merge himself into the part. Only then can he depict these feelings profoundly and meticulously" (Tian, Min 54). The Qing playwright Li Yü uses the famous novel 水滸傳 (Shuihuzhuan, The Water Margin) to explain how a writer should "put himself in another's case" to achieve vibrancy and similitude in characterization.

One's words voice his heart. If the author hopes to articulate a character's words, he should articulate the character's heart on his behalf; if the author has not dreamed of or traveled in spirit to the character's circumstances, how can he claim to have "put himself in the character's case"? For those characters who have erected upright thoughts, I shall put myself in that situation, and ruminate rightful thoughts on their behalf; if I meet those characters who have generated evil and inequitable ideas, I should also discard the principles and follow their powers, and temporarily speak their evil and unjust thoughts. The author should, in the depiction of internal thoughts and delicate feelings, make the characters speak out naturally and spontaneously; in speaking as a character, sound like him, instead of making him identical to others or become ordinary and indistinguishable. (Li Yü, Xianqing ouji 25)

For Li Yü, sheshen chudi encompasses three levels of sympathetic identification, including authorial identification with characters in literary texts, authorial identification with actors who play theatrical roles, and authorial identification with the theatrical audience. In Zheng's tanci, the first level of sympathetic identification (between the author and the characters) is particularly striking, and is also often
blended with the third level of identification, that is, between the author and the reader/audience.

In the text, "putting oneself in another's case" is prominently presented as the identification of the authorial narrator with the characters at moments of pathetic or emotional appeals. When the reincarnated immortal Zhuang Yuan retreats to the sacred mountains to search for his parents, his friend Lin Wu suffers from his absence. The author states, "Very often I allow the character to suffer emotional turmoil. / As an author, one has to make adjustments as the story demands." She then comments on her relationship with the characters, that "it is not easy to imagine myself in the character's case. / Such an endeavor does not just successfully happen overnight" (4: 40, 82). For the author, "putting oneself in the other's situation" implies sincere and heartfelt depiction of the characters' emotions. In imitating the characters' emotions, the authorial voice interpolates with the diegesis and speaks in the manner of the character.

Reverberating with Li Yü's idea that the author should articulate the character's heart, Zheng's *Mengyingyuan* effectively presents the empathetic identification between the author and the character in the following example. When the male protagonist Zhuang Yuan leaves his family and goes in search of his ancestors in the immortal world, Mrs. Zhuang then asks their adopted daughter Renfang to compose a biography for Zhuang Yuan. Renfang finds it an extremely challenging task, for "to depict his deeds is nothing outstanding; / as an author she must meticulously portray his heart and emotions" (2: 25, 201). Associating her own filial affection for her father Zhuang Yuan, Renfang finds it a tremendous challenge to write about her father's own filially devoted deeds. "Before even writing down a word she sheds tears; / her heart, drenched in sorrow, is unusually downcast" (2: 25, 201). When the biography is finished it elicits the same pathos from the family relatives who "shed tears when reading, unable to hold back their sadness" (2: 25, 201). This fictional example of authorial identification with character mirrors Zheng's understanding of the empathetic author, whose writing depends on her sincere emotive associations with the fictional character.

This authorial identification with fictional characters is sometimes manifested explicitly as a case of narrative mimicry, that is, when the heterodiegetic narrator's voice intervenes and mimics the voice of the character in the story. In the following example, when Zhuang Yuan leaves the earth in order to search for his immortal ancestors in the mountains, the narrator takes on the perspective of his friend Lin Wu and contemplates Lin's melancholy from his point of view. "How does one cross a city of a thousand miles of sorrow? The most affectionate person is none other than he who, in melancholy, encounters another who is also burdened with grief, changing his mind to dissolve his feelings, only to find more burdens in his mind" (3: 28, 1). The lack of identifiable pronouns, characteristic of pre-twentieth-century Chinese poetic narratives, allows the narrative voice a certain mobility to shift between the extradiegesis and the character's consciousness, and further, reduces the traces of the narrator's subjectivity. The narrator relates what the male character thinks and sees from his perspective. By "putting herself in the case" of the sentimental Lin Wu, the authorial narrator transcribes the character's conjectures. This example indicates
that *sheshen chudi* implies a fusion of subjective positions between the authorial narrator and the character, regardless of the differences between their genders and backgrounds. It is not within the scope of this chapter to examine whether sympathetic identification between the narrator and the character always implies a case of narrative mimicry. Nonetheless, one may notice the irony in textual moments like this, when a character's consciousness is filtered through the narrator's presentation no matter how well the narrator's presence is concealed.

The narrator's direct sympathetic identification with the fictional characters is ubiquitous in *Mengyingyuan*. The narrator comments on Han Ziying, the daughter of a rich family, who was committed to changing her mother's lavish lifestyle. "She ventured to use her personal power to transform degraded social customs; / I agonize for her that she could not carry this out in practice, even though she was ambitious. / Before writing about her, I first let out a sigh, / for this woman was very exceptional. / Like a multihued phoenix perching in the thorny bushes, / she must have found it hard to withhold sorrow when looking at her own forlorn shadow" (3: 34, 151). The narrator's presence is explicitly asserted through the use of the first-person pronoun. The narrator's compassionate lament, or *tan*, is thus interwoven in the emotive commentary on the woman character. In this case, the word "lament" is both an affirmation of the woman's usual achievements and a lament on the vicissitudes of her fate. The narrative lens shifts from the external narrator to the psychological realm of the character, projected through the narrator's sympathetic identification. The last line, "she must have found it hard to withhold regret when looking at her own forlorn shadow," suggests a readerly sympathy for the character's situation that mirrors the fate of the authorial narrator herself. Accordingly, the last word, 悲 (*bei*, sorrow), calls forth feelings generated by a fusion of the narrator and the character, the self and the other. The text thus demonstrates an involved author who dedicates herself to the task of transforming social customs through the personal practice of writing. Sorrow is seen as moral emotion by the narrator, who discloses an awareness of herself as capable of inhabiting the feelings of others. The following example conveys a similar situation in which the authorial voice makes an explicit emotional appeal to the readers.

Simple are my words, far-reaching their meaning.  
Three times I let out sighs; nine times affection and rage penetrate my body.  
My heart's devotion is that of the *Jingwei* bird;  
like the *Jingwei* who sought in vain to fill up the sea with small pebbles, I  
mourn the frustration that comes in advance.  
My simple life has been ridden with divine retribution.  
Who would trust that my words are true?  
I hope you do not disbelieve my words.  
Please meditate on this piece three times, and trust my good intention.  
(3: 33, 144)

The first-person narrator here lays out a communicative frame from which the story continues. She interrupts and delays the storytelling process by inserting sighs
and exclamations. The usage of the imperative "please meditate on this piece three times" further reveals the narrator's desire to engage the listener/reader in a dialogic situation. To create a narrative relay by affecting emotive interventions, the narrator takes deliberate pauses to achieve an aesthetic distance from the events being recounted, heightening the readers' awareness of the gripping story. An example of this comes when the princess falls in love with the male protagonist Zhuang Mengyu, who is already married to Lin Xianyu. The emperor disguises himself and exits the palace in order to look for help in persuading Mengyu to accept the marriage proposal. The narrator builds suspense by commenting, "My readers, you should close the book and ponder the story; / the writer (zuoshuren) shall steal a moment of leisure and recede" (4: 42, 101). These personal remarks of the authorial narrator shift the readers' attention from the accounted events to the concrete communicative situation between the narrator and reader. This conclusive move also resonates with formulaic narrative expressions in many late imperial Chinese fiction works, when the omnipresent authorial narrator, claiming himself as 作書人 (zuoshuren, the one who composes the book) or 說書人 (shuoshuren, the one who tells the story), dwells in a vacillating position between the writer and the narrator (for a discussion of zuoshuren and shuoshuren in the evolution of Chinese fiction, see Chen, Pingyuan, Zhongguo xiaoshuo 62). This more distanced, omnipotent narrative stance is particularly conspicuous in the opening and closing lines of each chapter, revealing some disparity and restraint when compared with the more sympathetic depiction of the characters in the narration process.

The theme of sympathy in Mengyingyuan also invites a study of qing, or emotion/affection, a key theme in late imperial literature. The author evokes qing with an emphasis on filial piety and chastity, and suggests that Zheng rewrites the cult of qing in vernacular fiction to assert the importance of moral rectitude. The multifaceted meaning of qing gains momentum when contextualized in late imperial philosophy, culture, and literature. Qing amplifies the concept of narrative sympathy in a Western context, opening up space for an innovative understanding of the emotive connection between the authorial narrator in tanci and her targeted readers. Zheng's appropriation of qing exemplifies a personal author-reader relationship that reinforces the sympathetic bond among women in the domestic compound. As a modulating register, qing is recharged with different energy in this tanci and serves as an overarching sentiment presiding over and facilitating human relationships.

The idea of qing was endowed with varying implications in late imperial Chinese literature and philosophy. Before the Ming dynasty, qing was used to refer to the individual's emotions and feelings; it has been traditionally considered an opposite to the concept of zhi (志), which indicated ideas and aspirations, representing Confucian social and political philosophy. The expression of qing, or individual ruminations and feelings, was guided and regulated by zhi. However, beginning with the Wei and Jin dynasties (220 CE-589 CE), scholars gradually replenished the concept of qing and celebrated it as an important aesthetic value. Several important aesthetic and philosophical works contributed to this transformation of thought,
including 童心說 (Tongxinshuo, Theory on Child's Heart) by philosopher Li Zhi (李贄, 1527-1602), and 唯情說 (Weiqingshuo, Theory on Genuine Emotions) by playwright Tang Xianzu (1550-1616). Li Zhi holds that tongxin (童心) or "child's heart," is the pure "heart that generates man's thinking from the beginning," and is the root of men and women's natural desire (Li Zhi, Fenshu 273). Tang Xianzu, the author of The Peony Pavilion, holds that qing is a powerful sentiment that transcends the boundary between the physical and the spiritual, and can "take the life of the living and resurrect the deceased" (Tang, Mudanting 1093; see also Lou, 152-73; Zou, Zizhen). The interpretations of qing in Li's and Tang's theories challenged Confucian orthodox thinking (Liu, Guo 17; for discussion of qing as human desire, see Huang, "Sentiments"). The Ming philosopher Wang Yangming (王陽明, 1472-1528) furthered earlier scholars' theories and proposed that "the heart is the master of both xing [性human nature] and qing [human emotion]. Xing [is one's] heart and body; qing [is the] execution of the heart" (Wang Yangming 88). Wang Yangming's aesthetic theory marks an important transitional period in late imperial philosophy, leaving an impact on the literary works of the time and later generations.

One prominent literary example that gives evidence to the influence of the late Ming intellectuals' endorsement of qing is 情史 (Qingshi, A History of Qing), a fiction work by the late Ming author Feng Menglong (馮夢龍). For Feng, qing regulates and moderates the Confucian concept of li (principle). "Since ancient times, one's actions concerning loyalty, filial devotion, chastity, and purity, when executed following li, inevitably look forced and unnatural. When these acts are implemented in the name of qing, however, they will be more real and sincere . . . The scholars in the world only know that li is the model for qing. Who could know that qing would be the power of preservation for li?" (Feng, Qingshi 21). Feng Menglong's theory reconciles the seemingly disparate notions of qing (human emotions) and li (Confucian principles), and reinvests the cultural register of qing with innovative meanings. The collected stories in Feng's Qingshi (A History of Qing) display various implications for qing, ranging from a shared universal sentiment of human beings, heterosexual or same-sex love, desire, regret, or sorrow. Feng's reinterpretation of qing recalls critic Anthony Yu's suggestion that qing implies a kind of universal disposition of human beings. He notes, "The pervasive . . . and universal characteristic of qing is precisely based on the perception of it as the essential endowment of the human that cuts across social and cultural stratifications; it unifies the noble and the humble, the foolish and the wise, the worthy and the unworthy" (Yu 60). This understanding of qing as a universal human disposition also resonates in some late imperial women authors' writings and commentaries on literature. For example, in 吳吳山三婦合評牡丹亭 (Wuwushan sanfu heping Mudanting, Three Wives' Commentary on The Peony Pavilion; 1694), three female critics commenting on The Peony Pavilion consider qing, including romantic and sexual love, as "a noble sentiment that gives meaning to human life" (Ko, Teachers 84). Three Wives' Commentary on The Peony Pavilion is a work of commentary on Tang's play by three female scholars: Qian Yi (錢宜), Chen Tong (陳同), and Tan Ze (談則). This work received much
critical attention among scholars of later generations because it offers a feminine perspective on the characters in Tang's well-known work. Dorothy Ko, regarding these women authors, states that, "similar to Feng Menglong's reduction of loyalty and filial piety to sincerity of heart, these women affirmed that qing is an overarching principle governing all human relationships . . . and is not the prerogative of either sex alone" (Teachers 84). For the three women critics, qing is a universal sentiment which strikes a sympathetic bond between the readers and the text. The Three Wives' Commentary itself provides evidence for the outcome of this emotive connection between the women readers and the text of The Peony Pavilion (see Ye, Chang-Hai 105-36; Yang Fuji 165).

In Mengyingyuan, Zheng claims that her goal in writing is "to portray truly delightful situations in the heavenly realm of qing" (4: 48, 247). The sentiment of qing is first rendered as an imaginative ability to identify with the other, to feel along with the passions of the other. Simultaneously, in Mengyingyuan, qing embraces both emotional affinity and moral rectitude. Zheng insists that "to talk about qing, one must first put right his heart" (2: 15, 37). She takes pains distinguishing her tanci from the popular yanqing xiaoshuo (言情小說), or delinquent love stories (1: 10, 141). Zheng recurrently states her aspiration to "wash away the dirty parts in the field of qing, / so that the real qing can be revealed and grow more powerful" (4: 39, 43). Qing transcends the constricted concept of love, encompassing feelings of friendship, filial devotion, and empathetic understanding with others. As an ability to empathize with the other, qing is also endowed with a moral agency and bears the potential to carry out spiritual transformations. The twelve female characters, who could be considered the agents of real qing, devote themselves to "transforming social customs and advocating sacred beliefs, so that women under heaven can abandon depravity and return to the right path" (1: 10, 141).

In the narrative, qing operates in the relationship between the readers and the fictional characters with whom they identify, as well as in the relationship between the readers and the authorial narrator who, in her inserted episodes, explicitly appeals for the readers' emotional understanding. The following passage from Zheng's work expresses such a notion of qing. It takes place when the narrator grieves over two reborn flower goddesses, Tao Xianbi and Liu Lingjuan (劉令娟), both of whom die in anguish when their families force them to marry.

Life and death are always related to one's qing. When qing reaches those who understand with sincerity, these are real feelings. Even a thousand miles of distance can be reduced to inches; when the spirit is startled, she will return to the sacred island with chastity preserved. What a pity that those who treasure the spring hold their sentiments in vain; the blossom and the falling of flowers cannot not be predicted by human beings. Profound or simple, one's affinity with others is predestined. Long-lasting or brief in time, one's dream can always be traced to a previous cause.
Only those who can distance themselves from the world may have good fortune in their turn.
At this moment I myself cannot distinguish my *qing* of happiness from that of grief. (4: 41, 83)

*Qing* is depicted as a sympathetic bond between the deceased and the living, the fictional and the real. Zheng appropriates the word *qing* to address the readers' sympathetic identification with the characters. Haiyan Lee argues that *qing* figured prominently in the late Qing *xieqing xiaoshuo* (寫情小說), or novels of sentiment (4). The story is no longer a unidirectional projection to the reader. The narrator is not merely puncturing the illusion of reality. Instead, the text engages the readers in direct communication with the narrator, building mutual trust between them. The first two lines indicate that *qing* or emotions can only be testified to by a sympathetic understanding between two subjects. This emotional affiliation between the characters reduces the spatial distance between them. The fifth and sixth lines, however, address the changeable nature of human beings' lives, bringing up the Buddhist theme of predestination. At the end of the passage, the intrusion of the first-person "I" reveals a moment of narrative irony, when the personalized narrator acknowledges the distance between herself and the characters with respect to knowledge. In Zheng's *tanci*, *qing* might imply sincerity, benevolence, compassion, filial piety, or propriety, depending on the context. The author describes *qing* as an innate sentiment of human beings harbored in *chizi zhixin*, or the "hearts of the sincere children," a sentiment that incites man's moral actions (preface to *Mengyingyuan*). Hu Siao-chen, in a study of *Mengyingyuan*, offers a discussion of *qing* as filial devotion, and explores the interconnection between this *tanci* and the possible influence of late Ming *Qingjiao* or the "School of Qing" (Cainü 265-315). To conclude, the authorial narrator rewrites the cult of *qing* by including sympathetic identification as a form of emotive affinity between the narrator and the narratee and between the raconteur and the fictional character. In the dialectic relationship between the author, readers, and fictional characters, the authorial narrator voices her "self" and gives voice to the others. One may, again, relate the multifarious nature of the authorial narrator to the oral tradition, the origin of *tanci*. The narrator, like the storyteller, establishes a sympathetic connection between the audience and the characters as a certain mode of persuasion.

Mirroring the author's self-dramatization, many women characters have also addressed the issue of writing and authorship directly. These fictional characters' experience of writing parallels that of the authorial narrator. It is not that the narrator takes on a "double" in the text, but rather that the narrator finds partial identification with multiple heroines presented therein. In some parts of the text, the characters comment on choices of genres in writing and the lack of appreciative audiences, which indicates the involvement of the *tanci* author in the text. These textual moments are notable cases of self-reference, although the word *tanci* is not directly used, but only vaguely referred to as "half drama, and half novel," revealing the author's caution in utilizing this controversial narrative form (4: 35, 175).
In Zheng's *Mengyingyuan*, there are numerous depictions of women's poetry contests and games, and their ruminations about literary philosophy and stylistic choices. The text emplots twelve reincarnated flower goddesses who are well read in literary and historical masterworks. A main character, Lin Wenwan, is an outstanding poet herself and even drafts a memorial to the emperor on behalf of her father. Another prominent woman author is Tao Xianbi, who learns all the classes by heart at the age of three and later also becomes a women's doctor, offering medical service for women. At an early age, her parents pass away. She is then adopted by her aunt and uncle, and she learns writing and medicine. In her spare time she composes prose in the hybrid genres of drama and fiction; however, she dares not risk having these private writings published in public under her name, deeply concerned that her writings might be distorted by her capricious relatives. She talks over this dilemma with another character, Xianyu, who is herself a poet: "In the past I was adopted by my uncle, who constantly let me read popular plays. / Then he asked me to sing those lines to him. / In vain I tried to avoid such performances. / Then he used to change my words carelessly when he would read the text out. / I have thought of burning all my writing. / Regretfully I don't have the power to do so, even should I try very hard" (4: 35, 175).

Tao's confession indicates her worries that her ethical rights as an author may be violated. Her concern over having her writings made public indicates women authors' dilemmas with publication and the printing business of nineteenth-century China. Talented women of the late imperial period were discouraged from publishing before their marriage, or they refrained from doing so themselves because of social taboos. Some authors, forced to conceal their literary activities, would burn most of their work and leave little trace of it for others. Writing by women was published posthumously, and although some managed to publish their works, often with family assistance, these frequently suffered from extensive abridgement and even distortion. Because of these concerns, women relied on networking with other women writers and assistance from mentors to have their works published in a proper manner. As Dorothy Ko states, in the Qing some women who suffered the death of husbands or lost financial support became "teachers of the inner chambers," namely, private tutors of young閨秀 (guixiu, talented women) (Ko, *Teachers* 118).

The scenario of twelve flower spirits learning poetry from Mrs. Zhuang in Zheng's text is based on the phenomenon of women's learning of poetry and literature from literati scholars of the time, as exemplified by the famous scholar Yuan Mei, who was master to many female students, and poet Chen Wenshu (陳文述) who taught many women disciples (see Yu, Dan, "Huashen"). Among the talented female characters, Tao Xianbi (陶纖碧) grows up in a lower-class household and is forced to hide her writings from her prying uncle and aunt. Lin Xianyu, by contrast, is an upper-class woman whose works are composed with a moralistic purpose, including stories of pious children and loyal officials. These characters' anxiety about authorship and publication is also related to the genre that they have chosen for writing. Xianbi asks Xianyu,
"How many pieces have you written today? You should have them published, so that your original purpose is accomplished."

Xianyu replied, "I have only thirty pieces. Once I obtain approval from my parents, I will submit them for publication. My writings are half drama and half fiction, retelling the deeds of loyal officials and filially pious sons and daughters. We should make known the outstanding deeds of women in the boudoir, and gradually gather their stories together as a collection. We shall conform people's mind to the ancient ways of thinking, bring about a swift cleansing of their hearts, and enlighten them. Yet this is not an easy process, and we might very likely be frustrated, because some people of this time are blind, even if they have eyes, and cannot understand our intentions."

Xianbi let out a sigh. "Even so, there might be someone who could immediately understand us by reading our writings." (4: 35, 175)

In this passage, Xianyu speaks of herself as a *tanci* author, indicating that her writing borders between the genres of drama and fiction. The character is endowed with the thoughts and concerns of the *tanci* author who interpolates her own voice into the fictional character's voice and addresses the issue of women's writing with noticeable self-referentiality. The text illuminates the skewed relation between women and commercial publishing in the late imperial period. The appearance of women as both author and audience was in itself "one of the most remarkable elements of the urban culture taking shape in Jiangnan market towns from the mid-sixteenth century onward" (Ko, *Teachers* 30). The quickening pace of commercial publishing and the circulation of books "created a fertile ground for cross-pollination between the ideas of men and women, local and cosmopolitan cultures, and written and oral traditions" (Ko, *Teachers* 30). Nonetheless, the publication of women's writing in the late Ming and early Qing was largely paid for and controlled by their families (Widmer and Chang, *Writing Women* 147-70). In *Mengyingyuan*, Xianbi's writings are under the control of her crude uncle, who modifies her writings for public singing performances with liberty, and forces her to perform these works for him. Later with the help of her mentor General Lin Wu, Tao Xianbi has her writings preserved properly during preparation for publication as a literary work.

In these ways, Xianbi and Xianyu's conversation offers a look into women's literary activities of the nineteenth century. The female characters' discussion above is a direct statement of the necessity to endorse women writers' learning and achievement, in order to prevent violations of their ethical rights as writers and countervail the largely masculine decorum of the public print sphere. The text also displays these women authors' creative approach to popularizing tales of exceptional women by appropriating dominant discourses of filial piety and chastity. This authorial stance shields women authors from censorship by male editors and energizes women authors' voices in the public sphere.
The author's self-projection in the *tanci* is profoundly mirrored by women characters who themselves write and are confronted with similar ethical concerns about authorship and writing. The text contains extensive discussions of the genre of *tanci*, criticizes the narrative conventions of romance and marriage, and emphasizes the author's educational and moralistic concerns. When the Zhuang family eventually reunites with the twelve flower goddesses in the immortal world, Mrs. Zhuang proposes that a book should be written to record the experiences of the deities who have descended to the earth to redeem people's innocence and virtue. The characters' conversation about the choice of genre resonates with the authorial narrator's comment on her preference of *tanci* in writing at the beginning of the work. Mrs. Zhuang suggests, "Our story should not be composed into lyrics for stringed music, / lest it be contaminated by common singing girls. / It is better to let the *tanci* performers sing our tales, / so that even the most uneducated people will be enlightened" (4: 48, 241). Zhuang Yuan replies, "Although *tanci* is a minor genre, / its value depends on whether the author has set high goals or not. / If the author has an unconventional mind, / he or she would be able to adapt this genre to suit his or her purpose" (4: 48, 241). The characters' words draw attention to the authorial motive or purpose, which defines the literary positioning of *tanci* among diverse trends and genres. Remarkably, the characters answer the question of how their own stories should be told, suggesting that this *tanci* is to be completed. The ending lays bare a cyclical narrative structure that weaves back into the tale. Upon his parent's request, Mengyu composes a melody to commemorate the family reunion in heaven, accompanied by the musical performance of the flower goddesses. In regard to the authorial purpose in *tanci*, Zhuang Yuan comments that an author's goals in writing will determine the value of the work, regardless of the narrative form that one uses. Here, the fictional characters ponder and affirm the authorial choice of *tanci*, signaling a mutually empowering alignment between author and characters. The character is endowed by the author with a certain degree of autonomy in the narrative. The author opens herself to the character's critical scrutiny, and allows her characters to celebrate the use of *tanci* in narrating "their" stories. Perhaps Zheng wishes to stress the validity of her choice of genre and uses this scene within the diegesis to support her own decision.

Zheng establishes her moralizing voice by adapting discourses of filial piety and chastity to depict talented and virtuous women. The authorial voice empowers the readers by inviting the readers' sympathetic identification with the idealized women characters. This notion of empowerment takes place when the author endows the characters with the autonomy to assess the narrative form of the work. The characters' affirmative comments on the value of *tanci* give support to the stylistic choice of the author and affirm her presence in the literary text. In many passages, the text presents the authorial narrator as a cultured woman who articulates her grievances with the hardships of life and claims the right to her own "voice." This voice finds its power from retelling moral stories from the past. "Cleaning my ears, I will be as untainted as upright scholars; / contemplating in my heart, I approve only the words of ancient people. / Saddened by the fact that the field of *qing* has
been corrupted in the world, / I shall recount the upright deeds of the worthy and refined in times gone by (1: 1, 3).

In recounting tales of previous scholars of moral worth, the authorial voice finds its moral empowerment. The narrative is developed with an explicit focus on reinstating the moral order in society through the instruction of readers. This is possibly the reason the author locates the story in the Song dynasty of the tenth century and depicts the fictional characters as historical figures. On a related note, this authorial emphasis on moral obligation foregrounds a general view concerning the goal of women's writing in pre-twentieth-century China. Whether Zheng intended to create the work as an imagined history of unusual women is probably not within the scope of the current discussion to judge. It is clear, however, that the authorial narrator in Mengyingyuan plays a role analogous to a historiographer or a chronicler. This narrator recounts the individual characters' stories as historical narratives that are relevant to lives in the present.

The authorial narrator's acts of self-empowerment are conducted through mimicking and rewriting the literary traditions of the time. For instance, the narrator notes that her depiction of Zhuang Yuan and Lin Wu's friendship in the story is modeled on an ancient legend of friendship.

Since ancient times, the legend of Zhong Ziqi and Bo Ya's friendship has been widely applauded;
to imitate them, I started composing this book.
Exposing my amateurish writing to experts in literature,
I might only make them have a good laugh.
If my writing is without true feelings, it will not circulate.
Alluding three times to the images of fragrant grass and the beautiful being in An Elegy on Encountering Sorrows (Li Sao),
I have pondered the nuances of the poem.
I do not mind being perceived as an unabashed imitator,
for the word sincerity is not really out of date. (1: 13, 204)

The author, in the passage above, frames her own story within extant narratives, and develops her fictional authority by so doing. The authorial narrator states that Zhuang Yuan and Lin Wu's friendship is a reincarnated tale of the vowed friendship of Bo Ya (伯牙) and Zhong Ziqi (锺子期). The story of Bo Ya and Zhong Ziqi takes place in spring and autumn. When Bo Ya plays music, suggesting the images of high mountains and flowing spring, Zhong Ziqi can detect his thoughts. When Zhong Ziqi passes away, Bo Ya destroys his instrument, cutting the strings, believing that no one else in the world can understand his music (Liu An 1029). Also, the evocation of the classical poem Li Sao (An Elegy on Encountering Sorrows), written by Qu Yuan (340 BCE-278 BCE), represents a mimetic impulse at work in the narrative. The images of 香草 (xiangcao, fragrant grass) and 美人 (meiren, beautiful being) in Qu Yuan's poem are allegorical references to the poet and the king. The term meiren usually means a beautiful woman. In early Chinese literature, however, it can refer to a man or to a virtuous person (see the annotated version of the poem in Wei Yuzhang 3, and the translation of the text in Hawkes, Songs of the South). The
author might have conjured these images to denote Zhuang Yuan's relationship with the emperor. The loyal Qu Yuan is clearly the model for Zhuang, who is depicted as a faithful but unrecognized official of the emperor. By implying these intertextual connections between Qu Yuan's poem and her own work, Zheng asserts her status as a competent writer. These references indicate a case of narrative cross-dressing, in which the author takes on the position of a male poet and performs.

To return to Zheng's identification with the Jingwei bird cited at the beginning of this chapter, readers may trace a shared thematic tradition of feminine action, agency, and resilience between Zheng's tanci and that of the later female revolutionary martyr Qiu Jin, 精衛石 (Jingweishi, Pebbles of the Jingwei Bird; 1905; a substantial analysis of Qiu Jin and her work is in Wang, Lingzhen 1-27). Zheng's work, in retrospect, may carry women-oriented incentives for feminine self-articulation and self-reification against social pressure and turmoil, and anticipate ensuing narratives by progressive women authors in late Qing and turn of the twentieth century periods, including Qiu Jin's tanci and another protofeminist fiction, 女獄花 (Nüyuhua, Flowers of the Women's Prison; 1904), by Wang Miaoru (王妙如). The authorial insertions in Zheng's tanci offer a glimpse into the communicational structure of tanci and lead the readers to imagine the narrator and characters as speakers with whom they could share empathetic visions of life. Such empathetic associations between the narrator, the fictional characters, and the readers are channeled through and reinforced by the narrative model of sheshen chudi, or putting oneself in the situation of the other. Zheng's narrator is at once confessional and instructive, and often overtly comments on the lesson, purpose, and messages of her story. Presenting the moral qualities of filial piety and chastity as the most important human sentiments, or qing, the text replaces typical narratives of chaste widows with tales of young women who renounce marriage entirely in order to preserve their virginity during their lifetimes. Zheng's moral concern, to sum up, lends credence to her right to self-expression, to reify her self-empowerment, and to provide evidence that tanci works were morally and aesthetically empowering narratives for women.