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

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Chapter Four

Gender, Spectatorship, and Literary Portraiture in *Mengyingyuan*

In *Mengyingyuan*, the reader's sympathetic identification with specific characters is activated by Zheng Danruo's use of the motif of portraiture. The portrait scenario as used in her work calls into question traditional gender constructions in the late imperial context. While Zheng modifies extant literary representations of the "painted beauty," she transforms these scenes by rewriting them. In *Mengyingyuan*, literary texts fuse diverse spatio-temporal viewing positions. However, the imperative for the reader is to identify with certain fictional characters and find her place within the story's space. In this process, the reader's sympathetic identification with the characters takes place. Particularly, the painted image of the woman transforms conventional codes of verisimilitude and dismantles the male-oriented visual structure by gazing out at the male voyeur/artist. Viewing an image is, in Zheng's *tanci*, a process in which the author transforms the reader into a spectator of certain cultural images or scenarios that are themselves connected to the gendered codes of the late imperial period. Also, the process of viewing the portraits invites the spectator's sympathy for the painted image and, through sympathetic identification, provisionally modifies the viewer's sense of identity.

The opening of *Mengyingyuan* accentuates the visual nature of the narrative. At the very beginning, the text is already habituating the readers to frames and focusing on visual spectacles. Locating the story at the beginning of the world, the storyteller introduces the readers to a field of vision in which the real is represented as a series of images.

When the world first comes into being, the light and clear *qi* floats above and forms the sky, wherein a fog drifts with wind and transforms into an insect. With fluttering jade-colored wings, the insect absorbs the essence of sunlight and morning dew, and draws the quintessence of the sun and the moon. After a thousand years' of preparation, it transforms into a human being, and names himself "Mengying Zhenren." One time he collects and makes medicines in the Luofu Mountain in eastern Yue province.
the medicine is made, it widely benefits the ordinary people. The Heavenly Emperor thus awards him with the honor of Luofu Xianjun, making him the Lord of this mountain. He leads five hundred deities and inhabits a blessed dwelling in endless pleasure. When the human world goes through the East Zhou dynasty and the period of the Warring States, by accident he thinks of going to the common world, and descends to earth to play. However, he eventually risks degeneration. Fortunately, the Plum Goddess from the Mountain transforms into a human being and comes to awaken him. Thus, he is able to return to the immortal realm and live his previous life. With no further intention of descending to the earth, he hides his form and obscures his tracks. The Plum Goddess is then honored as Kuifang Xianzi, with the alternate name of Bihua xianshi; her origin, however, is unknown. (1: 1, 1)

This opening, written in fictional narrative, presents an attenuated perception of the world, in which the real is inexorably filtered through multifarious manifestations. The world is but an image, thereby engulfing the readers and inviting them to seek themselves in it. The invisible 氣 (qi, or air), harboring the holy spirit that was incarnated in the protagonist, acquires its human figure from a thousand years' metaphysical practice, naming himself Dream-Concealed Deity (Mengying zhenren). His title zhenren (真人), or "real person," is a Daoist title referring to a god or a deified mortal, representing an ideal immortal being who transcends earthly desires and dangers. The word yin (隱), meaning "concealed," bears significance in late imperial literature, and implies the ironic rupture between objects and their allegorical meanings. The deity's self-chosen title, 夢隱 (Mengyin, dream-concealed), possibly carries an allusion to the famous Qing novel Hongloumeng (The Dream of the Red Chamber), indicating the tension and interrelation between human and heavenly dimensions of existence that are mimetically credible. The opening of the text bears much resemblance to that of The Dream of the Red Chamber, in that the narrative revolves around the journey of an incarnated male protagonist who seeks self-perfection through his worldly adventures. The diegesis of the narrative situates the relation between the main characters in medias res as a great part of the story, that is, Kuifang's help for Mengyin's redemption has already taken place.

Zheng's text carries a comparable narrative frame, as in The Dream of the Red Chamber, but with a subtle subversion of the male and female protagonists' affiliation at the beginning. The characters' names, Zhuang Yuan and Lin Xianyu, suggest possible association with the protagonists Jia Baoyu (賈寶玉) and Lin Daiyu (林黛玉) in Cao's text. Cao's hero Baoyu is originally a sacred stone and divine attendant named Shenying shizhe (神瑛侍者), or Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting; he waters a heavenly plant, Crimson Pearl Flower (Jiangzhu xiancao, 絳珠仙草), which eventually transforms into a goddess. To return his favor, the goddess descends to the world with the stone and is preordained to show gratitude to him by huanlei (還淚), or "returning the tears." The stone in this novel, as Andrew Plaks observes, serves as "an eyewitness of its own history and informs us that what we read is based on its memoir" (207). The stone not only transforms the flower fairy into a human being, but also endows her with emotions and gratitude. In Mengyingyuan, however,
when the divine spirit falls into the human world by fault and risks being bereft of his divine rank, it is the Plum Goddess who transforms into a human being and descends to earth to enlighten him. The moral redemption of Mengyin is accomplished through the assistance of the Plum Goddess, who later is awarded the title of Premium Flower Goddess (Kuifang Xianzi) for her exceptional deeds. The above opening passage attests to Zheng's claim in the preface that her story was composed to record women's unusual deeds in the inner chambers. The passage ends in suspense, without revealing the identity and whereabouts of the mythical goddess: "as to the Plum Goddess, her origin however is unknown" (1: 1, 1). The text thus builds up the readers' anticipation of re-encountering this character in the tale. This preliminary storyline foreshadows the heroine as an active agent, whose talent and virtue will find endorsement through the plot development.

In contrast with the stone which serves as a proponent of verisimilitude in The Dream of the Red Chamber, which is also called 石頭記 (Shitouji, Story of the Stone), the portrait functions as the mimetic surface in Mengyingyuan onto which meaning is projected. The painting, when treated as a visual text, showcases a situation of narrative prolepsis. Prolepsis in narrative, as outlined by Genette in Narrative Discourse, can be conceived as "telling before time" (1). Genette holds that the essence of prolepsis lies in the mismatch between the order of the narrative and a notional chronological story. Prolepsis occurs when an event is told earlier in the order of the narrative than it would be if the strict chronological order of events of the story were followed. Zheng's tanci commences with a portrait of the Zhuang family that represents domestic bliss and foreshadows Zhuang Yuan and his wife's predestined return to the heavenly realm. The narrator describes the portrait through the eyes of the wife of Zhuang Yuan's nephew, who was invited to visit the couple after Zhuang Yuan resigned from the position of prime minister and returned to his hometown (1: 1, 35).

In the middle of the hall there hangs a dark board, on which is inscribed, "Hall of Everlasting Admiration."
The arrangement in the room inside is simple and elegant.
In the center of the wall hangs a portrait, which seems to depict a scene of a backyard, with ancient trees and meandering corridors between buildings.
On a pavilion by the water, a person rests by the rail, in flowing headwear and light-colored robe, dressed as if he is a deity.
Another person sits on a stone by the pond; her hair looks like wind, her clothes like cloud.
A maid waits on her by her side, her refined hands holding a flower bucket.

The wife of Zhuang Yuan's nephew ponders on the portrait.
The person who sits alone watching the fish bears an elegance that resembles Uncle Zhuang. His whole stature closely resembles Uncle.
At most, the painted image has three strands of beard.
Otherwise, he looks not at all different from the real person.
Could it be that the painting was intentionally made older than he was?
What is more suspicious is the person who smiles, holding the flower, looks very like Aunt. Even the young maid looks exactly like Sister E; they are almost perfectly the same. This is indeed a picture of a common family enjoying a good time together. Why then was the picture hung in the central hall? . . . At first, I mistook it as a portrait of deities, a portrait of the mythical deities, such as Lu Dongbin and He Xian'gu. . . . The other day when I scrutinized the painting again, I found the resemblance of the painted figures to Uncle and Aunt. As for the kind Sister Cai E, even she is a person in that painting! (1: 2, 35-36)

The position of looking is crucial to the visual structure established in the actual viewing process (Mao, Wu, Xingbie 34). When the story begins, the Zhuang family's portrait, hanging on the north wall of the central hall, raises many questions and theories about its origin and implications. Yet both Zhuang Yuan and his wife are extremely reluctant to speak of the origin of the painting. The portrait is claimed to be one of the deceased parents of Zhuang Yuan, their maid, and Yuan himself when he was a child. However, in the picture, not only does Zhuang Yuan's father resemble Zhuang Yuan, but also his mother resembles the later Mrs. Zhuang, who married Zhuang Yuan many years after the portrait was made. Additionally, the maid in the portrait resembles the later Mrs. Zhuang’s maid, which convinces the viewer that the picture is a complete depiction of the real Zhuang’s family. Through the eyes of the female character, the readers are challenged to view the painting frequently. Such recurrent viewing is comparable to a process of reading, in that paintings are analogous to narrative frames that constantly open up new realms of interpretation. Intriguingly, this family painting is produced by an anonymous artist whose identity is never revealed throughout the tanci. The absence of the "author" of the painting further suggests the anachronistic nature of the narrative, the origin of which is inadvertently lost.

Visualization in the late imperial period can be considered in relation to the production, circulation, function, and reception of portraits. The significant development of printing technology since the mid Ming has enabled authors to insert figures, images, and miniatures in their writings to draw customers’ attention. Distinguished fiction and drama works, such as Mudanting (The Peony Pavilion) and 西廂記 (Xixiangji, The West Chamber) by Wang Shifu (王實甫, 1260-1336), were published with many editions that contained large numbers of drawings as complementary parts of the texts. Robert Hegel, in Reading Illustrated Fiction, provides a contextualized analysis of novel illustrations. Hegel suggests that the art of printing in medieval Buddhist sutras demonstrated the interrelation between illustration and narrative (178). In the Ming and Qing, popular narratives such as pinghua (chanteables) and chuanqi (plays) were illustrated to facilitate reading and circulation. Whereas publishing fiction became commercialized during the Yuan period, Hegel suggests that the use of block-printed book illustrations were conditioned by the publishers' economic concerns (179). In the tradition of tanci fiction, published texts
like *Zaishengyuan* (Destiny of Rebirth, late eighteenth century), *Jinguijie* (Heroes in the Golden Chambers, prefaced dated 1824), *Bishenghua* (Blossom from the Brush, nineteenth century), and *Mengyingyuan* (Dream, Image and Destiny, author's self-preface dated 1843) were frequently published in illustrated editions and contain abundant portraits and miniatures. Some illustrations in *tanci* also carry poetic inscriptions or rhymed lines addressing the character or theme in each painting, as in the 1840 edition of 繡像十美圖 (*Xiuxiang shimeitu*, Illustrated Portraits of the Ten Beauties) (Sheng, *Qingdai* 377). Making and appreciating portraiture constitute a crucial textual theme in late imperial literature. In this context, Zheng's *tanci*, which depicts characters making, viewing, exchanging, and interacting with portraits, modifies extant narratives associated with portraits of and by women, and display the transformative potential of women's presence in portrait scenarios.

A close reading shows that the text contains an intertextual reference to *The Peony Pavilion* by Tang Xianzu (1550-1616). In Tang's play, the heroine Du Liniang's ghost is startled in the underworld by her lover Liu Mengmei's call to her painted image, and visits Liu in order to fulfill their relationship projected in a prior dream. Likewise, in *Mengyingyuan*, the metaphysical dream trope is brought into a dialectical relation with the "image," for, as the title indicates, the destined affinity between the characters is produced through the interplay of "dream" and "image." The male protagonist's name, Mengyu (literally, "dream stone"), is an intertextual reference to the earlier novel, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, in which the male protagonist bears a similar name: Baoyu ("precious stone"). If the dream represents a fusion of past with present and forshadows the characters' reunion in marriage at the end, it is the painted "image" that recurrently unravels multilayered possibilities of reading that complicate and potentially disrupt the development of the plot toward a consummate narrative closure.

Verisimilitude, in *Mengyingyuan*, is evoked to generate sympathetic relationships between the viewers and the portraits. The painted images of Zhuang Yuan's parents, who become immortals, bear an exact likeness to Zhuang Yuan, his wife, and their maid.. This refined likeness of the immortals' portrait to the private life of the Zhuangs possibly reflects the authorial ideal of putting the immortals into reincarnation in order to execute worldly transformation. The text presents the overlap between narrative pictures and portraits. The portrait of Zhuang Yuan's parents and maid can be interpreted as having important narrative elements. As a portrait of the immortals, it reinforces the message of ethereal happiness and transient pleasures, and foreshadows Zhuang Yuan's later decision to search for his immortal parents in the mountains. Perusing the portrait, for the characters in the story, strikes a chord of their preordained interrelations with each other (2: 16, 40). In Dream, Image, Destiny the author rewrites this scenario of wanzhen 玩真 (playing with the portrait) in two different episodes, one of which features Zhuang Yuan's son Mengyu's painting of Lin Xianyu, and the other of which concerns Xianyu painting her would-be father-in-law, Zhuang Yuan. In each case, the act of viewing prompts the viewer's sympathy for the painted image, and in return modifies the viewer's self through sympathetic identification.
Representations of women in literature by literati scholars are frequently conditioned and constructed by the elite, male-dominated literary discourse about women's social roles. Do these texts represent the controlling of women's desire through narrative framing? How does Zheng's text modify these narratives and project an innovative interpretation of the portrait scenario? How does Mengyingyuan explore the possibility of reconfiguring this tradition of "beauty portraits" by presenting spaces of reversal and transgression? Zheng says at the beginning of the first chapter that she has borrowed from extant narrative conventions regarding the appearance of portraits in writing, with an eye to transforming these conventions and endowing them with new meanings. "Twice in this book I have rewritten the 'playing with the portrait' scenario, / for one must agree that a fledgling phoenix has a more refreshing voice than a mature one" (1: 11, 173). The allusion to wanzhen (appreciating the portrait of a person) can be traced to the ninth-century story "Huagong" (The Portrait Maker) from Songchuang zaji (Pine Window Miscellany) by Du Xunhe (see Zhang, Jing'er 486). In the story, a painting of a beautiful woman comes alive when a male scholar calls the subject's name, Zhenzhen (真真). The woman then steps down from the painting and marries the scholar. The name of the painted woman—Zhenzhen, literally meaning "real" or "genuine"—ironically shows the woman's imagined existence, for she only becomes real when her name is spoken by the man.

The scene in which Zhuang Mengyu makes a portrait of Lin Xianyu, his predestined bride, provides a compelling example of the visual dynamics between the male artist and the painted women, who occupy different gendered viewpoints. In this scene, Xianyu's resistance against being captured in the painting reveals her wish to counteract the male protagonist's subordination of her body by calling and naming her painted body. In the story, Mengyu has long had excellent painting skills and is praised by his mother, Mrs. Zhuang, for having magic hands that could capture the spirit and fragrance of the image. When he reached the age of twelve, Mrs. Zhuang intended to marry him to Song Renfang, a daughter of Zhuang's friend. However, Mengyu has feelings for the Plum Goddess, who is reborn as Xianyu and shares a predestined bond with him. Mengyu is thus unwilling to marry another woman. However, as a devoted son, he cannot reject his mother's suggestion. In response to his mother's request, he paints an image of his ideal wife, based on his inborn memory of the goddess.

Mrs. Zhuang stands behind Mengyu and looks frequently at the painted image. She sees the facial features and is very startled that the image looks so real. Then she sees him painting the refined shoulders, hands, and waist. The painted girl, dressed like a goddess, is naturally beautiful . . . Fully smiling, the image seems about to talk; her eloquent eyes appear to be looking at the audience, enhancing her beauty all the more. Anguished with admiration in facing the image, the kind-hearted mother cannot help feeling compassion and pity. After a long interval, she calls upon Mengyu joyfully, "It is truly a different person!"
She and Miss Song both have endless grace; one could not tell which one is more beautiful. Yet Miss Song's body often bears so much fragrance, and no less than you who bear so much fragrance like the legendary Xun Ling, whose fragrance lingers in places where he has sat.

The painted image is indeed very beautiful, yet it is most difficult to pass through the fragrance of it. She is, after all, not comparable to Miss Song; even though she is predestined to marry you, she should let Miss Song be the first one."

Mengyu then replies to his mother, smiling, "Please observe the painting carefully."

Mrs. Zhuang then approaches to smell the image, which exudes whiffs of subtle fragrance from the beautiful woman's sleeves.

Xun Yu (荀彧, 163-212), who is mentioned in the above passage, is known for the intense fragrance that he was born with. This allusion to Xun Yu's fragrance is later extended to refer to the elegance of a literary scholar (Li Fang, Taiping yulan 703: 3113). With Mrs. Zhuang's close inspection of the painted beauty, the text invites a close observation of the image and controls the reader's sensory experience. Like Mrs. Zhuang, the reader is engaged in a process of looking, feeling, identifying, and empathizing with the painted goddess. The text situates the reader in a dynamic visual space in which he or she is constantly constructed as a sympathetic subject. The painted beauty is desirable, but inaccessible. Mengyu's hands, which "capture the fragrance and soul" of the image, inch by inch, inscribe the imagined desire of the male subject toward the woman. The visual structure represented in this scene highlights what Laura Mulvey calls the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of what is represented. However, the painted beauty transforms this desire by "looking back," controlling and reverting the gaze of the male artist/viewer. In fact, her image is so breathtaking that it even "daunts" the viewer (1: 11, 163).

The reader, along with Mrs. Zhuang, is invited by the painter to look at the portrait repeatedly. Upon first glance, Mrs. Zhuang takes the painted image as her selected daughter-in-law Song. Gradually, the image gains life under the viewers' scrutiny, and even emits a subtle fragrance to the viewers. The grace of the painted image is displayed through her bodily actions: with a smiling face, she looks at the viewer with eloquent eyes. The "gaze" from the painted beauty undermines the male-dominated visual structure and supplements the one-way viewing gaze into an associative one. The goddess exchanges gazes with the viewer and prompts the viewer's sympathetic identification. This scene stages a shifted power relation between the mother Mrs. Zhuang and Mengyu. Mengyu, a child of six, insists on his autonomy in choosing his own spouse by painting the woman that he wants to marry. His filial devotion to his mother allows room for his autonomous choice. He pleases his mother with the beautiful painting and expresses his wish to have a choice in marriage. The author's dramatization of the power dynamics among the painted woman, the male viewer, and his mother expresses an innovative understanding of the underlying familial
relationship among the characters. Both Mrs. Zhuang's son and her future daughter-in-law display individual autonomy in addition to their filial devotion.

The viewer's sympathetic response in the above scene also affirms the image's representational potential, its power to reverberate within the viewer's mind and body. The painted goddess responds to the viewer's desire, emanating a delicate scent from the sleeves, implying the imperceptible motion of the woman's hands. The scene exposes a narrative embedded in the identity of the painted woman, whose illusory presence supplements the male artist/viewer's own loss of self. The painted beauty is a consolation for Mengyu's loss of Xianyu, and evokes his desire to restore his celestial self to his physical being in this life. The text depicts the subtle movements of the image as follows:

Mrs. Zhuang turned back. She saw that the painted beauty, her jade ornaments stirred by her movements, was about to approach them.
Mrs. Zhuang smiled and called Mengyu to see the painting.
"Your magic brush can truly capture the body and soul of the woman. If you can call the beauty to life, you might as well name her."
Upon these words, Lanjun thought privately, "If I call upon her name, I am afraid that I will imprison her spirit. I am afraid that I would take the life away from her fragile body; even though she is skillful in maintaining her heavenly spirit, she is but a physical being." (1: 11, 171)

The scenario wherein a painted beauty comes to life when called upon by a male viewer, as discussed above, alludes to a legendary painted beauty who is revived from the paper and marries a male scholar. The story, widely circulated, elicited the emulation of later writers. A similar example is in Mudanting (The Peony Pavilion, author's preface dated 1598), when the love-enchanted Du Liniang takes up her paint brush and makes a self-portrait. She laments, "How futile is it to make this self-portrait? / Who would weep over it? / Were I the legendary painted beauty Zhenzhen, / still no one would call my name" (Tang, Mudanting 36). Liniang's melancholy is provoked by the absence of the male viewer Liu Mengmei, while she projects herself into the imaginary subject position of the legendary Zhenzhen. The textual moment is an example of melodramatic pathos, wherein the subject's grief is caused by the deferral of narrative closure. Liu does not discover her self-portrait until after her death. This pathetic scenario of Liniang's narcissistic gaze at her own portrait has been replicated extensively in later literary texts.

The above passage of Mengyu painting a portrait of his predestined companion possibly alludes to the seventeenth-century play 畫中人 (Huazhongren, The Painted Beauty) by Wu Bing (吳炳, 1595-1648). The play depicts a love story between the scholar Yu Qi and the painted beauty Zheng Qiongzhi (鄭瓊芝), who is resurrected from the portrait scroll and marries Yu Qi. The plot of the play bears a similarity to that of the earlier The Peony Pavilion. Wu closes Huazhongren with the comment, "What can be as effectual as [the power of] qing? / It could even make the image in
scattered painting powders come to life" (Wu Bing 5). In Wu's play, the portrait becomes a vehicle of qing (desire) and makes possible both the rebirth of the deceased and the reunion of the separated. The resurrection of the painted woman depends on the mechanism of human emotions, a topic which has been extensively discussed in the study of late imperial literature. Kathryn Lowry, in a study of the genre of 情書 (qingshu, love letters) in late imperial China, argues that love letters enlist popular reading materials to conjure qing, "feeling" or "desire." The language of desire is the result of a discursive process of reading (Zeitlin, Liu, and Widmer 239-69). Wu's play depicts a visual space that draws the readers' attention to the dialectic between the observed beauty and the male observer. In Mengyingyuan, this dialectic between the fetishizing male spectator and the woman's image is amplified; she is not simply an object submitted for the male viewer's contemplation—she also carries a notably unsettling power to stimulate desire, reverse the viewer's gaze, or even dismantle the voyeuristic visual scenario.

Women themselves, in Mengyingyuan, also paint portraits of men. Their artistic practice breathes life into their painted images and constructs a gendered perspective on chastity and filial devotion. The author compares her heroine Xianyu with the famous Linliang: "Linliang's much acclaimed story of a departed soul searching for love / has been passed down for hundreds of years and won much praise. / In comparison with Bihua Xianshi, / one can perceive the difference in the significance of the matter. / I admire Xianyu's heart, which is as pure as water, / and far surpasses those sentimental writings that speak of overt emotions" (1: 12, 46). Zheng's allusion expresses admiration for the legend of Linliang's resurrection by the power of love. However, unlike Linliang, who internalized the man's desire and awaited his call to come back to life, Zheng's heroine Xianyu resisted the summoning of Mengyu and the entrapment of his desire for her in the portrait. Zheng's mockery of Linliang's pathos rewrites conventional narrative representations of women. In Mudanting, Linliang's subjectivity is inscribed for an imaginary male viewer and awaits affirmation from the male spectator. Xianyu's character, however, is more praiseworthy for her resistance to the male gaze, and her refusal of the narrative closure of predestined marriage. By rewriting the portrait scenario, Zheng reveals the woman's resistance to becoming an object of male connoisseurship. Mengyu's calling on Xianyu signifies the subordination of the woman's body by naming. When Mengyu and his mother observe the painted image, the reincarnated Plum Goddess Xianyu falls mortally ill because of her emotional connection with Mengyu. She blames Mengyu for taking the liberty to summon her spirit, and decides to keep her virginity during her lifetime, despite their predestined relationship. A comparison of Xianyu and Linliang highlights Zheng's endorsement of Xianyu's virginity and her disagreement with stereotypical representations of pathetic women in literati literature. Zheng thus distinguishes her writing from the negative stereotypes of sentimental women, and indicates that women in her work are dedicated to a higher standard of moral integrity.

Stereotypes of women in nineteenth-century court art, Wu Hung writes, suggest "thematic, stylistic and iconographic generalization in art and literature" (306).
Such stereotypes should be contextualized in the "complex historical process in which a uniform pattern of imagination and representation gradually prevails to control not only the fictional characters, but also the self-imaging of the author, reader, and viewer" (307). Zheng's text, in this light, reprocesses the beauty portrait motif in a women-oriented narrative, doing away with the stereotypes of passivity attached to women. The portrait carries symbolic associations with death and resurrection, as is the case in *The Peony Pavilion*. Liniang paints her portrait when lovesickness has begun to take its toll on her looks, as a response to her knowledge of her mortality. After she passes away, Liu Mengmei finds the portrait, which she has buried in the garden. He calls on the painted image and startles Liniang's spirit. The portrait has a life-giving power, activated by the male viewer's gaze upon the painted woman. Likewise, in *Mengyingyuan*, Mengyu's gaze upon the painted Xianyu is so powerful that it almost takes away the spirit of the heroine. "One night when the mother and son are both viewing the painting, / they see the image of the beauty frequently casting affectionate glances. / Turning her shoulder, she seems to come out of the painting, or go into the depth of the picture. / Seized by the sight, Mengyu cannot hold back his tears (1: 11, 172).

The return of the painted goddess to life reveals a reversed visual structure, with the painted woman repeatedly flashing a gleam back at the viewers. Her unsettling gazes lead to continual raptures in the textual presentation and anticipate Xianyu's resistance against her prescribed role. The painted beauty is located in a place from which the male protagonist and the reader observe her. When she turns a gaze back, Mengyu is startled by her dismantling gaze. He weeps, hoping to call her name, yet refrains from doing so, for fear of taking her spirit away from her body. The physical being of the woman, the ideal of beauty, appears in sublimated form, as the physiognomic expression of the spiritual. The physical incarnation of the heroine in the portrait bespeaks the yearnings of the viewers. Yet the woman casts brooding glances towards and behind the viewer into the distance, disrupting the unilateral visual structure and transforming the direction of the look. In a melancholy mood, she tosses her shoulders, as if to escape into the deep end of the painting, or to flee from it. The motion of the painted woman suggests a sorrowful beauty who suffers from loneliness and estrangement, her celestial purity perpetually out of place in the surrounding human world. While the story highlights the suture between authenticity and imitation, the portrait is an ironic reference to a male desire to frame and control the woman through a subordinating visual structure. This visual structure consists of the male artist who himself is an observer, the painted woman, and the subject of the painting, Xianyu, who is summoned by the male artist's imagination. The mother's observation of the portrait also displays a deep level of gender socialization, as she ponders and assesses her as a future daughter-in-law.

This scenario of resurrecting the painted beauty through the spectator's gaze recurs later in the tale. After Zhuang Yuan becomes a good friend with Lin's father Lin Wu and arranges Mengyu to marry Xianyu, Mrs. Zhuang visits the Lin family to meet with Xianyu. Upon her first sight of the beautiful girl, Mrs. Zhuang is instantly
struck by the resemblance of the portrait to Xianyu's appearance. "Mrs. Zhuang was overjoyed to find that the painted beauty Zhenzhen was her real daughter-in-law!" (1: 11, 172). The text reifies the heroine's image with the illusion of verisimilitude. Yet what Mrs. Zhuang perceives as "real" in the portrait has already dissipated. The painted woman is given the embellished name of Zhenzhen, the painted beauty who came alive when called upon by a scholar. The affirmation of Xianyu as the legendary Zhenzhen represents the woman's body as an idealized medium, which stimulates the spectator's desire and makes the woman a culturally inscribed object.

In the former scene in which Mengyu makes a portrait of Xianyu, the painted woman's image is idealized and subjected to sexual objectification, mirroring an objectification of women at the social and cultural level. Mengyu acquires a "misrecognition" of an imaginary relationship with the painted image. In this particular scene, the imagery of the woman implies possible modes of resistance in the visual structure. Xianyu's image is activated and gains life under the gaze of Mengyu and her future mother-in-law. For the viewers of the portrait, and the readers as well, her body seems to make involuntary movements by casting meaningful gazes back. These bodily movements, however, cannot change the fact that her image is a silenced one. Xianyu's painted woman lacks a voice to counteract the subordination of her body, and consequently she cannot speak back to resist her destined matrimonial bond (for a similar story on the romance between a scholar and a painted beauty, see Zhang, Jing'er 493-98).

When Xianyu's soul is summoned by Mengyu's portrait and departs from her body, it is her reincarnated celestial sister, the doctor Tao Xianbi, who awakens her from a fatal spell by calling Xianyu's childhood name. Seeing the seriously ill Xianyu, Xianbi thinks to herself, "From what I can see, the reason for Miss Lin's illness is none other than that someone has seized her soul by making a portrait of her. / Yet where can I find the person who made the portrait, / so that the painting can be destroyed, and she can recover? / Even though my medicine has some effect, it cannot counter the skills of the painter. / She is not simply suffering a temporary illness. / When looked at closely, it seems her facial features are not real" (1: 12, 188). Intriguingly, as Xianyu's disease worsens, her body increasingly loses its substance and becomes indistinguishable from the painted image. As Mengyu exerts his influence, Xianyu is gradually displaced from her physical being and becomes merely a sign for the painter's own desires. The tension between Lin's body and the portrait is dramatized to such a degree that the portrait even threatens to take away her life. Her presence is reduced to a void space in his imaginary screen. This crisis, however, is resolved by Xianbi, who perceives the effect of the portrait and counteracts its magic by calling Xianyu's childhood name. Contrary to the story of Zhenzhen, in which the scholar gives life to the painted woman by calling her name, Xianyu retains her life by denying the naming act of the male spectator. This act against Mengyu's control is legitimated afterwards: by taking back her natal family's name, she fulfills the obligation of filial piety, a moral obligation more important than her duty to her future husband.
The portraits in *Mengyingyuan* possess such immediacy that the boundaries between the real and the representational are dismantled. The painted image at first appears to be the product of the male protagonist's imagination. Xianyu is a reflective image; her presence is only a figurative one. Later, with a burdened conscience, Mengyu burns the painting to finally exempt Xianyu from the painting's spell: "the image in the painting dissipated in a mere moment; / only a faint fragrance of the plum flower was detectable in the air" (1: 11, 172). The burning of the portrait shows the author's intention to divert from the prospect of marriage and demonstrates resistance against such narrative impulses. Liniang's self-portrait, in *Mudanting*, is preserved after her death as proof of her resurrection and marriage with Mengmei. In *Mengyingyuan*, however, Mengyu's portrait of Xianyu is destroyed. This dissimilarity between the two texts suggests Zheng's search for an alternative closure, in which the heroine's fate is no longer constrained by the pledge of love.

An example in Zheng's *tanci* that addresses women's ironized bond with their painted images involves the beauty Wang Zhaojun (王昭君), who falls victim to the portrait maker's manipulation. The reincarnated goddess Xianyu, with her exceptional painting skills, crafts a portrait of Wang to applaud her "purity, constancy, loyalty, and chastity" (2: 2, 135). She asks her father General Lin to compose a poem on this portrait. The poem, reminiscent of the famous female poet Xi Peilan's satirical poem on Wang's life, goes as follows: "The melancholy tune of the *pipa* penetrated the Yanmen Gate [at the frontier], / Across ten thousand miles her chained soul returns to her home country. / Her tomb is imperishable, so is the Fragrance Creek; / Never did the portrait bring joy to the beautiful maiden" (2: 21, 136). The *香溪* (Xiangxi, Fragrance Creek) is a branch of the Yangzi River in South China. Legend has it that Wang was born in a small county by the river and was selected to be a royal consort during the reign of Emperor Yuan of the Han Dynasty (74 BC-33 BC). Resonant with Xi Peilan's poem, the passage illustrates Wang's tragic fate caused by the misrepresenting portrait, indicating the painting could not actually speak for the woman herself. In Zheng's *Mengyingyuan*, this episode appears before Xianyu's illness caused by the portrait, indicating Xianyu's reluctance to submit to the hero's voyeuristic control. Such revisions of the portrait scenario can be found in many late imperial *tanci* works. In *Zaishengyuan*, Meng Lijun leaves her parents a self-portrait as a surrogate for her person and flees her home, exploring new possibilities of life by disguising herself as a man. Likewise, Zheng's modification of the portrait scenario depicts a woman in search of her own desire, discarding imposed social and cultural frames as encoded in the portraits of women. The narrator criticizes Mengyu for making the portrait of his beloved carelessly: "I blame him for often using the portrait without caution; / overwhelmed with love, he neglects Xianyu's parents. / Addicted with desire, his mind is demeaned and impish. / His behavior really diminishes the name of scholar and beauty" (1: 11, 173). Xianyu's words indicate that the image scenario is oftentimes employed without enough caution, and consequently denigrates the reputation of women. The reluctance to offer her own image as a passive visual object is possibly the reason Xianyu refuses to become one of the painted beauties in the
shadow, lacking substance. When Xianyu is asked by her father to create a portrait of the "hundred beauties," that is, one hundred women noted in history, she declines to paint her own image among them, even though her parents encourage her to do so.

The question of gendered, as the above textual scenario displays, is of prominent importance when it comes to portraits of women. Imperial literati intellectuals approached portraits of women from the stance of connoisseurs of feminine beauty. However, women themselves had a tradition of making their own portraits, as well as making statements about their ideals through these painted images. Talented women, many of whom were skilled in painting, composed poems for their friends' paintings. References to women making self-portraits can be found in many historical records since ancient times. Some scholars hold that painting was initially an artistic practice of women. One of the earliest painters is a woman, Lei (嫘), who was a younger sister of the ancient Emperor Shun (23-2 century BCE). Lei was the first person who took to painting, and thus was named the Painter Lei (Liao, "Guige hua" 31). Lei had the power of creating the world and deserved the name of the "Progenitor of Painting" (Mingmo Shilong 147). These earlier records found resonance in similar stories of women making portraits in later generations. In the eighth century, a talented woman, Xue Yuan, to call back her husband who was traveling, made a self-portrait on which she composed a poem to show her longing for him. The poem was entitled, "A Self-Portrait for the Traveler."

Before making the first stroke with the painting brush,
I took up the precious mirror and had a look at myself.
Already shocked by my withered look,
Now the hair around my temples is even thinner.
Easy to sketch these eyes filled with tears,
Difficult to compose lines that speak of my melancholy heart.
[I] hope you my lord do not forget about me,
And will open this scroll at times to have a look. (Ji, Tangshi 1122)

As the title of the poem suggests, the woman's self-portrait invites a compassionate gaze from the male viewer and suggests the wife's subordinate relation to the husband. The poem internalizes a male-oriented perspective, presenting the woman as a passive object under the masculine gaze. Unlike Yuan's poem, Zheng's text enables the reader to imagine a feminine perspective that undermines and even reverses this male-oriented visual scenario so common in literary and historical narratives about painted women.

Ming and Qing literary and historical records provide evidence that women played multifarious roles in the making and circulation of portraits. Some women's activities were recorded by literati authors. Yuan Mei's work Suiyuan shihua (Sui Garden Remarks on Poetry, 1790), for example, include a record of anecdotes about poets, and some entries reflect women poets' relationships with paintings. He notes, "In ancient times there were no miniatures. [The tradition of portraiture] may be traced to the paintings of the ancient worthy and chaste women in the Wuliang Temple of the Han Dynasty" (Yuan, Suiyuan shihua 231). Yuan's comment suggests that
the ancient portraits of women might have been initially created to advocate women's chastity and filial devotion, topics presented in mainstream social discourses about women's virtue.

In Yuan Mei's story, "紅袖添香圖" ("Hongxiu tianxiang tu," "Portrait of the Added Fragrance of Scarlet Sleeves," eighteenth century), a scholar, Feng, paints a portrait of an imaginary woman, having no particular person in mind. Later, Qiu, a friend of Feng, sees the painting and is struck by the resemblance of the image to his own maid, Hua. Qiu then invites Feng to his house and gives the maid to Feng as his wife. In this tale, the scholar's portrait of the imagined woman becomes a pledge for an unanticipated marriage with a maid the painter had never met (Yuan, Suiyuan shihua 206). This anecdote suggests that portraits of women, idealized or realistic, were important parts of the literati culture. A similar example in the pre-twentieth-century English literary tradition is Robert Browning's well-known poem "My Last Duchess," in which the Duke Ferra presents to his guests a portrait of his former wife, while negotiating a second marriage with a daughter from a rich family. While the poem carries signs that the Duke had murdered this former wife himself, the portrait of the woman survives and displaces the woman's actual presence. The poem represents the Duke's appreciation of art as well as his controlling and manipulative nature.

Many women in late imperial China were themselves accomplished painters. In the late nineteenth century, scholar Tang Suyu edited a collection entitled 玉臺畫史 (Yutai huashi, A History of Paintings of the Jade Terrace; 1871), in which she listed four kinds of women painters, including palace maids, noted women of the gentry, women servants, and famous courtesans. Painting, like poetry, was one of the areas of artistry in which a talented woman might excel. For example, in the eighteenth century, Sun Biwu (孫碧梧), a student of Yuan Mei, once invited Yuan and thirteen talented women to a banquet in Hangzhou city. At the gathering, the women poets exchanged poems and paintings with one another as gifts (Yuan, Suiyuan shihua 553). An attending female scholar, Xu Yuxin (徐裕馨), made a portrait of this gathering titled "隨園湖樓請業圖" ("Suiyuan hulou qingye tu," "A Gathering of the Suiyuan Poets at Hulou"; see Yuan, Suiyuan shihua 553). Some well-known late imperial women poets and painters were Liu Shi (柳是, 1618-1664), Li Yin (李茵, 1610-1685), Fang Wanyi (方婉儀, 1732-1779), Yang Guxue (楊古雪, late eighteenth and early nineteenth century) and Liao Yunjing (廖雲錦, nineteenth century). Liu Shi published a collection of paintings, 月堤煙柳小卷 (Yuedi yanliu xiaojuan, A Small Scroll of the Moonlit Dam and Shadowy Willow). There were also a few women who earned a living by selling their paintings; the early nineteenth-century poet Shen Shanbao, who was born in a humble family and lost her father in childhood, sold her poetry and paintings to support her widowed mother (Chen Yun 8b).

Some portraits depicted women as cross-dressers. Late eighteenth-century woman poet Shen Xiang (沈纕) described a portrait of the courtesan Liu Shi, in which Liu cross-dressed as a young scholar to pay a personal visit to a male scholar. In Shen Xiang's poem about this painting, she notes, "Who could tell the truth from the appearance of a person after all? Beauty or scholar, now both are seen as
one" (Shen Xiang 15a). This unique example depicts Liu Shi's cross-dressed image, which recalls other similar examples of portraits of women in men's garb. In Wu Zao's play, 飲酒讀騷 (Yinjiu dusao, Drinking Wine and Reading Li Sao; nineteenth century), similarly, the protagonist cross-dresses and makes a portrait of herself in a man's robe. She laments her fate in being born a woman under social constraints, mimicking the ancient poet Qu Yuan. Images of cross-dressed women such as these suggest late imperial women authors' conceptions of alternative gender representations in literary works.

Readers may find many poems composed about Ming and Qing women's portraits or as inscriptions on paintings in poetry collections. A particularly important genre of poetry is the set of poems dedicated to paintings. Mao Wenfang proposes that these poems composed on paintings reflect "a dialogic relation" between the painted image and the observer who composed the poem on the painting (Mao, "Yige qingdai" 56). While poems composed about or inscribed upon paintings can be used by readers to reconstruct some of the details of paintings that have been lost (Mao, "Yige qingdai" 56), originally these poems were likely to have served to enrich the viewer's experience of interacting with the painted image. Mao's study focuses on the famous poet Gu Taiqing (顧太清, 1798-1877). Gu and her husband Yu Hui both had their portraits made, and then each composed poems on the other's portrait. Gu also composed poems for the portraits of her friends in the inner quarters, including Li Renlan (李紉蘭), Xu Yunlin (許雲林), and Shen Xiangpei (沈湘佩). Xi Peilan also commented on paintings by women and had her own portraits commented upon by others (Yuan, Suiyuan nudizi shixuan 1: 213). Poems by women about portraits show that the women depicted were not merely passive objects of male artistic connoisseurship. In women's own literary communities, portraits of and by women may even have counteracted the male-oriented voyeuristic visual structure, by foregrounding a woman's perspective.

A good example of the ironized relation between portraits and the painted woman is a poem by Xi Peilan, from her work 题美人冊子: 王嬙 (Ti meiren cezi: Wang Qiang, A Collection of Poems on Beautiful Women: Wang Qiang) (Xi 2.7b). The poem alludes to a historical woman named Wang Qiang, more often called Wang Zhaojun (王昭君), a woman in the harem of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (156 BCE-87 BCE). The emperor selected his concubines according to the women's painted appearances. To win an emperor's favor, many women bribed the painter in the palace into making beautiful portraits of them. Wang Zhaojun, an honest and beautiful maiden, refused to do the same and consequently failed to attract Emperor Hanwu's attention. In 33 BC, the Huns of the north wanted to establish friendly relations with the Han through marriage with a Han princess. Unwilling to marry off either his own daughter or a real beauty to the nomadic Huns, the emperor ordered the plainest maid to be chosen as the candidate. Wang, whose portrait was among the least attractive, was selected. As she departs for the Huns, the emperor sees her in person and regrets his choice instantly but cannot reverse his decision. Instead, he grants Wang a generous dowry, and she travels north, playing the pipa on her solitary journey to the
remote country. After she joins the Huns, Wang devotes her life to the spreading of Han culture and civilization. Back at the palace, the emperor, enraged by the portrait maker's deception, puts him to death. Xi alludes to this incident in a poem: "Falling out of the regal favor due to a portrait, she fled to a foreign land. / In the cold snow and frontier wind, the radiance of her looks declined. / The melody of pipa beyond the frontier, the dances in the royal palace, / All the same, they took pains to offer the emperor pleasure" (Xi 2.7b). The poet's reference to the portrait in the first line presents the ironic situation of the portrait, a determinant of women's fate, failing to do its subject justice and making her a misfit. The last two lines deepen the irony, suggesting that both the favored women and the one in exile are no more than objects of pleasure for the male ruler. The poet's comments suggest the pathos in the women's situation and the absence of a woman's perspective from these portraits.

If portrait is a product embodying the artist's person and his or her inner mind, in what ways are the female artist's portraits revelatory of women's autonomy? In Mengyingyuan, Xianyu's portrait is made by Mengyu to celebrate his own subjectivity and virility; the text, however, presents the visual objectification of the female image as morally problematic and as having potentially emancipating power. The painted images are not just the erotic or sexual objects under the artist's brushes; instead, portraits resist this and other forms of objectification. Zheng's inventive use of the portrait scenario exemplifies women's creative appropriation of portraits to endorse chastity and filial devotion. In Zheng's tanci, women's determination to preserve virginity in the name of serving their natal parents is also seen in the character of Liu Lingjuan, who paints a self-portrait to show her determination to stay unmarried for her lifetime. In these two stories, chastity is an exemplifying form of gendered filial devotion. Along with these stories about chastity, Zheng also converses the theme of filial devotion through the portrait of Zhuang Yuan. This portrait, named "Portrait of a Filial Heart," was painted by the talented heroine Xianyu to commemorate Zhuang Yuan's good deeds toward his parents and his loyal service to the emperor. Zheng portrays women's artistic authorship as having prodigious value in advocating the moral principle of filial devotion, echoing Zheng's proposition that the transformation of social customs shall begin from the inner quarters.

Paintings in the text display the author's moral interpretation of gender relationships in marriage. Zhuang Yuan and Mrs. Zhang have respectively made marriage arrangements for Mengyu, with two talented women, Lin and Song. Both of them, as the narrator reveals, are reincarnated flower goddesses in a predestined bond with Mengyu (2: 22, 148). The father Zhuang Yuan has fittingly made a painting of 岁寒三友 (suíhán sānyǒu, Three Friends of the Winter), referring to the three images of friendship, including the pine tree, bamboo, and plum tree. He then inscribed on the painting the birth dates of the male protagonist Mengyu and his two future spouses, indicating an idealized matrimonial structure (2: 16, 40). The portrait here serves as a vehicle for forging matrimonial bonds between Mengyu, Lin, and Song. The allegorical reference to the "Three Friends of the Winter" is ridden with implications of chastity and moral integrity. As the fourteenth-century scholar Hu
Han stated, "The gentleman respects the pine tree for its chastity, the bamboo for its straightness, and the plum blossom for its purity" (Brinker 39). The author appropriates this scenario to underwrite an idealized matrimonial structure based on men's and women's spiritual companionship, which alters the traditional belief of women's subordinate relationship with men.

Moral obligation, especially women's chastity, becomes one of the most prominent messages that is delivered by the paintings in the text. Liu Lingjuan, a disciple of Mrs. Zhuang, paints a self-portrait to express her determination to remain unmarried. She tells Mrs. Zhuang, "My teacher, if you want to perceive my ice-pure wish of staying free from marriage, / please behold this embroidered self-portrait" (3: 36, 199). The author describes Lingjuan's resistance to marriage as revealing the "heart of a sincere child." Unlike the portrait in The Peony Pavilion, which symbolizes the love knot that leads to a consummated marriage, Lingjuan's self-portrait pictures an imagined self who strives to escape the social control of women through marriage. Such social emphasis on women's chastity surfaced in Song Neo-Confucian culture in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and became much more intense after the Manchu conquest in the mid seventeenth century. In the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, governmental policies rewarding and encouraging widows' chastity partially contributed to the cult of marital fidelity. Due to the impact of the chastity cult, many Chinese women in the eighteenth century committed suicide after they were sexually compromised, molested, or raped (Theiss 68). This concern about maintaining chastity is reflected in Lingjuan's self-portrait, which, as it is embroidered on white silk, reveals her wish to preserve her virginity. Lingjuan's image of an integrated self, however, is shattered when she falls victim to her cousin's malicious scheme. In the story, Lingjuan's cousin Jingsheng falls in love with her and bribes her maid into stealing her jade swallow-shaped hairpin for him. Jingsheng then reveals her hairpin to her mother, claiming that Lingjuan has asked the maid to give him the hairpin as a pledge of her affection for him. Persuaded by Jingsheng, Lingjuan's parents decide to marry her to him. Lingjuan discovers her cousin's scheme with the maid, which has contaminated her chaste name, and, enraged by the injustice, vomits blood excessively and dies instantly. Lingjuan's portrayal of beigong ying (Infant of the North Palace) projects a form of imagined feminine autonomy (for discussion of this allusion see the previous chapter). The image of the woman as an eternal infant suggests that for women, preservation of their virginity is a means of rejecting socialization through marriage.

Feminine virginity in the context of late imperial literature also assumes various contextual meanings, reflecting specific social, historical, and cultural conditions. For example, women's "religious virginity," symbolized by goddesses and religious nuns, "was concerned less with physiological integrity than sexual renunciation and rejection of the married condition" (Menegon 313). Mengyingyuan manifests such influences of Buddhism and Daoism, depicting twelve immortals who descend to earth to redeem the moral trend of the ethereal world. The idealized virgin goddesses might have appealed to women readers of the time who were victims of imposed marriages. Virginity, in this context, is a form of "celibate chastity" (Menegon 313).
that deserves more appreciation. In dynastic China, however, feminine virginity was assessed from the male-oriented viewpoint as a guarantee of the purity of the ancestral line in the husband's family. When a girl was disgraced with a promiscuous name before marriage, such as in Lingjuan's case, she had no other choice but to die or commit suicide. Such situations of women's suicide are related to Neo-Confucian codes about female chastity. By the time of Ming, however, arguments against women's suicides on account of chastity were increasing (for a discussion of the Confucian regulation of feminine virtue, see Harvey, Sex; Carlitz, "Desire" 101-25). Lingjuan's death underscores the poignant fact that she was already possessed as a piece of property before marriage and had no other space to claim as her own.

The text praises Lingjuan as a martyr, an example of those "chaste women who excel in both talent and virtue" (3: 36, 218). However, her almost defiant devotion to chastity against her parents' desire shows that she is by no means a passive character. Her death by spitting blood indicates a kind of self-inflicted violence caused by rage against injustice and suggests that only in death could she speak on her own behalf. The portrait is then an object of self-warning for the heroine to guard her chastity and it suggests her power to defy her socially prescribed identity. The author's interpretation of the cult of chastity focuses on the woman's devotion to moral integrity for her own sake, her potential to renounce marriage and resist social control, and her power of defending herself through death. Feminine virtue, in Zheng's text, can be used to speak for women's own interest and choices. Filial devotion to one's parents can justify one's wish to stay unmarried. The heroine Lin Xianyu, for example, resists a marriage with Mengyu, blaming him for carelessly capturing her image with the portrait. In order to please his parents, he has both put her life in danger and upset her parents. She contemplates, "With all the means to entertain your family, / why do you have to make a portrait of me to please your parents? / For our predestined bond, I am willing to sacrifice my life. / I am disappointed because you took advantage of my passion to please your parents. / I am regretful that without true honesty and generosity you could not be truly filially devoted; / and that you do not know how to put yourself in my situation and sympathize with me" (1: 11, 193).

Xianyu's rejection of physical manipulation also foreshadows her insistence on her virginity after her marriage with Mengyu. In her choice of filial devotion over respect for her husband, the readers may perceive a counterbalance of power and resistance. The text, by employing and rewriting the discourse of feminine virtue, suggests that in women's lives there are times "when disobedience is filial and resistance is loyal" (Stone 261). By exploring the conflicts between moral obligations for women, and by presenting filial devotion as a higher obligation than submission to the husband, Zheng indicates a space for women's resistance against the orthodox social and cultural systems of her time.

In Mengyingyuan, women characters make portraits to show their wish to preserve their virginity. Their self-portraits retain a transformative power by replacing the fetishizing viewpoint of literati intellectuals with women's own point of view. In the aforementioned case, the portrait bespeaks Xianyu's wish to retain her virginity.
and to live an autonomous life outside the marriage system. In Xianyu's situation, the woman's body becomes a dramatized site of resistance. Lin's painted image disrupts the male-dominated visual structure by looking back at the viewers. In both heroines' circumstances, women appropriate the discourses of women's virtue to speak for their own interests. Zheng's view of virginity reflects her indignation at the social victimization of women. The twelve protagonists all remain virgins, and many pass away in illness before marriage. The text's depiction of women's celibacy and death suggests the exclusion of women from their social and cultural surroundings. The goddesses' return to the heavenly realm is only an imaginary alternative to most women's tragic outcomes in reality. This is perhaps the reason why, at the end of the work, none of the reincarnated goddesses wishes to be reborn as a woman.

Painting, like poetry, marks women's accomplishments in the late imperial period. The heroine Lin, for instance, is asked by her father to paint a portrait of Zhuang Yuan, entitled 心孝子圖 ("Xin xiaozi tu," "Portrait of a Filial Heart"). The painted Zhuang Yuan, of the "filial heart" to which the name of the painting refers, is applauded as an exemplar of loyalty to the emperor and filial devotion to his parents. By creating the painting, Lin not only pleases her own father Lin Wu, but also fulfills her filial duty to the Zhuang family, for she is soon to be married to Zhuang Yuan's son, Mengyu. Making this portrait is thus her personal endeavor, and it reflectively endorses her commitment to moral principles. The portrait is completed with a biography titled Biography of a Filial Child, composed by Song Renfang, another reincarnated flower goddess, who later also marries Mengyu and becomes Zhuang's daughter-in-law. The purpose of this painting, as Lin Wu suggests, is to advocate Zhuang's good deeds and educate the people of the world. In making the portrait, Lin, who has never seen Zhuang Yuan in person, encounters her celestial vision in a dream: "Suddenly she recalls that one day she dreamed of Zhuang Yuan and his son Mengyu, / who closely resemble each other. / Since she has met Mengyu in the Luofu Mountain in the dream, and still remembers some of his appearance, / maybe she can make a portrait of Zhuang Yuan based on the dream, and meet her father's desire" (2: 25, 206).

Xianyu's celestial vision, parallel to Mengyu's portrait of her, vividly depicts the image of Zhuang Yuan. When she finishes the painting, the image of Zhuang Yuan is so lifelike and exuberant that it instantly fills Xianyu's chamber with fragrance. Her father, who is a close friend of Zhuang Yuan himself, becomes enchanted with the portrait and often gazes at it, praying for the happiness of Zhuang, as if the image were alive. In that she produces an extremely lifelike image of Zhuang Yuan, the heroine displays a fantastic power. When she finishes the painting, the painted figure is so lifelike that it takes the observing maid by surprise:

Lifting the lamp, seated by the window,
Xianyu contemplates Mr. Zhuang's image from recollection,
"It is impossible to depict this deity under worldly circumstances.
I will first try to depict his facial features."
Her skills are truly distinguished.
The painted image gazes with glaring eyes, his spirit coming alive on paper.
The clever and appreciative maid is frightened; she hurries to Xianyu and calls her, clinging to her dress, "Although your father's order cannot be disobeyed, how can you use your skillful hand to prey on his spirit? If his soul departs from his body, you will be blamed for the consequences."
(2: 25, 209)

This scene evokes the custom of *dianjing* (點睛), or dotting the eyes, in the traditional Chinese painting; having finished sketching the image of a painted being, the artist dots the eyes and makes the image lively on the page. Her skill in painting, as the maid suggests, is so overpowering that it can take the life of the painted subject. The above example exposes a fissure between the portrait itself and the woman's act of making the painting. Although Xianyu creates the painting to show her filial devotion to her own father, her act of painting the image suggests a captivating power over the painted image of Zhuang Yuan, her yet-to-be "father." The scene is also reminiscent of a scene in *Zaishengyuan*, when Lijun creates a portrait of herself and asks the maid whether the portrait resembles her likeness. In both scenes, the attending maid represents a bystander's perspective, confirming the heroine's power and skill. In the latter case, the maid enlightens the protagonist about the fantastic power of the portrait to summon the painted person's soul. The maid's tone is didactic, warning the talented mistress of the disrupting moral implication of the painting. This refined scene is embedded with several visual frames, showing the artist viewing the portrait, the portrait reverting the gaze, and the observing maid, who perceives and articulates the moral implication of the portrait for the readers.

In the text, both the portrait and Zhuang Yuan's biography are copied and circulated for the moral education of the public. This particular incident shows that the "transformation of social customs shall take its beginning in the inner chambers. Such practices will gradually expand their influence to the outside" (1: 1, 3). The inner chamber is a space in which women acquire a certain authority by exercising their moral agency; and the portrait gives the woman artist this power. Xianyu's talent in painting is displayed in her ability to make portraits of loyal officials and distinguished scholars in history. As a preliminary practice for making the "Portrait of a Filial Heart" she paints a picture of the famous Zhuge Kongming (諸葛孔明, 181 AD-234 AD), a loyal minister and outstanding military strategist of the Three Kingdoms Period (57 BC-668 AD). The text depicts the artist's aesthetic control over the man's painted image, reversing the hierarchical relationship between the male artist and his objectified feminine subject. The woman becomes the maker and the spectator of the man's image; she enlivens his likeness, but she also has the power to seize his spirit with her magic brush. The story presents the notable tension between these seemingly incongruous representations of gender relationships that underlie the theme of moral virtue. Whether didactic in purpose or not, the portraits allow the spectator to interpret them from a moral standpoint.

Zheng's maneuver of portrait viewing and gendered spectatorship calls for a close reading of the changeable relationship between the portrait and its sympathetic
audience. Zheng presents several instances in which the spectators sympathize with and make emotive responses to a painted image. When Mengyu realizes that his portrait of Xianyu may put her life at risk, he destroys the painting out of sympathy for her. In another episode, Xianyu's painting of Zhuang Yuan draws emotional responses from the Zhuang family. When the portrait becomes a stand-in for the subject, it elicits feelings from the viewers, amplifying the viewers' emotional experience. The text encompasses multifarious depictions of both men and women observing portraits from diverse angles. Zheng's refined illustration of the spectator's experience is instructive, augmenting the readers' own awareness of their relations to the painted image and the observing characters.

Although many examples from authorial insertions carry signs that the author is addressing women readers, the actual community of historical readers of Mengyingyuan might have included men as well. A study of the text invites an elucidation of the connections between the general audience of the tanci and the particular women-oriented perspective that the author brought forth with portrait scenarios. This women-oriented perspective does not necessarily imply a community that only includes women readers or viewers. The sympathetic perspective in the text is a gendered viewpoint but does not exclude men as possible sympathetic viewers.

Mengyu's sympathy for the heroine occurs when he realizes that the portrait has caused Xianyu a grave illness and nearly taken her life. Stricken by grief, "he becomes conscientious and burns the painting" (1: 11, 193). Xianyu's illness recalls a similar scenario where the enchanted Liniang dies of lovesickness after an imaginary encounter with the scholar Mengmei. Liniang later returns to life when called upon by a male viewer, whom she once addressed as the "cure" for her ailment (2: 20, 116). In Mengyingyuan, several women avoid arranged marriage by committing suicide or otherwise dying. In contrast with the spare narrative style of zhiguai (tales of anomalies), which allows less room for exploring human inner tendencies, Mengyingyuan contains detailed psychological accounts and depicts the internal consciousness of these women characters (for a study of female suicide in the dynastic narrative genre zhiguai, which are supernatural stories about ghosts, fox spirits, and other strange phenomena, see Huntington, Alien Kind; "Ghosts Seeking Substitutes"). Death, in Zheng's text, becomes another means of feminine expression, which challenges representations of the female body as a silent and nondiscursive space upon which the male artist/voyeur exercises his power. The narrative convention of the erotic fused with magic and disease is changed greatly in Mengyingyuan. Love and desire are secondary to true sympathy for one's companion. Thanks to Mengyu's conscientiousness and his concomitant act of burning the painting, Xianyu is cured of her disease. The tanci conjures up a scenario of narrative sympathy in which the painting facilitates a sense of identification between the male artist/viewer and the heroine, whose image has been seized and who suffers a consequent illness. Mengyu is deeply immersed in the image of the woman, but finally sees beyond the painting and acquires an extended perception. Rae Grenier defines this idealized relationship as "extra-sensory intersubjectivity" (309). Mengyu's vision is amplified
when he adopts the viewpoint of the feminine protagonist. It is no coincidence that Mengyu cross-dresses several times as a girl to dance and entertain his parents, demonstrating his remarkable mobility in inhabiting male and female gender roles.

The male viewer in this case evolves into an "impartial spectator" characterized by "not a feeling-into, but a feeling-along-with the state of mind and emotions of another" (Greiner 307). The idealized male spectator is part of the larger social and cultural context that influenced the women writers of the late imperial period. Here the literary scenario of the portrait explores the subjectivity of reading and interpretation, inviting the readers to immerse themselves in the worlds of the characters. As the portrait teaches its viewers to perceive what is beyond the painting, the author instructs her readers to engage themselves in the text with critical attention. In this way, Zheng resembles Western fiction authors such as Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Jane Austen, who "appropriate, interrogate, and transform the spectator-as-reader trope . . . as they jockey for critical authority in their novels" (Gardiner 11). Zheng's imaginative creation of an idealized male spectator represents the author's desire for a more sympathetic audience, including men who are capable of empathizing with a woman-oriented point of view. At the end, when Mengyu and the goddesses ascend to heaven and unite with his parents, he volunteers to return to the world again, incarnated as a woman, in order to write the stories of the goddesses into a tanci (4: 48, 240). This ending suggests potential gender reversal, when the sympathetic hero can be reborn as a woman in his next life and write the story from a woman's perspective.

In Mengyingyuan, portraiture inspires a sense of spirituality in the viewers. Zhuang Yuan and his family members often worship and meditate on the portraiture of their ancestors, in order to understand the hidden truth of life (4: 40, 66). Viewing the portraiture is a remedial process in which predestined causes dawn on the viewers and help them overcome the loss of a family member or a sworn friend. The reincarnated goddesses, when viewing the portraiture, are reminded of their predetermined bonds and foresee their awaiting destinies. Portraits are marked with an arresting responsive efficacy: the painted images, when viewed by their sympathetic viewers, respond to them with subtle gestures, expressions, and even whispering voices. The emotional efficacy of the portraits could be manipulated for various purposes by the artist. For Lingjuan, her embroidered self-portrait expresses a determination to practice female asceticism and an endorsement of virginal chastity. For Xianyu, portraiture could be appropriated as a way of telling a visual story of Mengyu's and her own filial piety. After Mengyu ranks high in the imperial exam and becomes a favorite official of the emperor, he finds it difficult to extricate himself from the court and return to his hometown to take care of his mother. After the emperor rejects his request to resign many times, Mengyu's wife Xianyu makes a painting titled 慈鳥望哺圖 ("Ciniao wangbu tu," "The Mother Bird Longing for Feeding") which, making an analogy of the mother bird and Mengyu's aged mother, moves the emperor to tears; Mengyu is eventually allowed to resign and return to his hometown (4: 40, 66). This portrait like the previous "Portrait of a Filial Heart"
exemplifies Xianyu's capacity to exercise a form of moral agency through visual images. Through these affecting portraits, a female artist could transform social and ethical relationships, reshaping and augmenting the beholders' feelings of parental, filial, and conjugal love.

The following scene portrays several male characters engaged in a sympathetic relationship with the image in the painting. After Zhuang Yuan leaves, his family longs for his presence and finds comfort in looking at his portrait. One day, Zhuang Yuan's aged uncle pays a visit and sees the portrait, and, unable to withhold his passion, calls Zhuang Yuan's name.

Driven by sorrow and anger, Mr. Zhuang loses control of himself, and cries at the portrait, "My nephew! You are born outstanding and unrivalled in this world, and do not belong here. You should have followed the example of Liu Gang, who took his wife when becoming an immortal, instead of becoming another Mei Fu who completely deserted his family. Even though you have ascended to the realm of bliss and reunited with your own father, you will suffer from loneliness, with no companion except your own shadow. Isn't it regretful when two love birds can no longer fly together?"

(3: 2, 198)

In this passage, Liu Gang is a legendary Daoist alchemist, who ascends to heaven with his wife Fan Yunqiao. According to 神仙傳 (Shenxian zhuan, Biographies of the Immortal Beings, fourth century), a work by Daoist Ge Hong (284-364), Fan used to outrival her husband Liu Gang with her expertise in alchemy. Lady Fan, a distinguished poet herself, composed a number of poems on Daoist practices (Ge 129). Another legendary figure alluded to, Mei Fu, was a loyal official of the Han dynasty, and was famous for offering honest advice for the emperor Cheng (51 BCE-7 BCE). Later, to escape from the Wang Mang Rebellion, which threw down the Han Empire, Mei Fu fled to the mountains and became a Daoist recluse to avoid political persecution. Legend has it that he became an immortal at last (Ban Gu 2917). Occupying the central portion of the painting, Zhuang Yuan's image successfully elicits the old uncle's passion; without anticipating this, the uncle exclaims his thoughts to the portrait. The viewer's involuntary physical response shows the portrait's function of moving observers to action. Hu Siao-chen argues that Zheng's infatuation with the portrait is related to the theory of 感應 (ganying, stimulus and response), which undergirds much of ancient Chinese thought. According to this theory, a portrait's power of disconcerting and capturing the spirit of human beings was evidence of the artist's superb skill (Cainü 288; Yu, Anthony, Rereading the Stone 68). The scene of the uncle calling to the image attests to the fantastic power of the heroine, whose skills have resurrected the deceased on paper. The old uncle's regret is provoked by a comparison of the portrait of Zhuang Yuan with the family portrait of Zhuang Yuan's parents, which the uncle has seen before. Zhuang has followed his father's path in searching for the immortal world. However, within the viewer's associative gaze, the portrait implies that in the immortal world, he is still suffering from the ethereal afflictions of solitude and separation from his wife and children.
The portrait constitutes itself as a sympathetic text, with its variable surface reflecting its ability to embody the reader's desire. This desire sometimes displays the reader's attentive reading of the progressive potentials in the painted image. In some places, the text presents women looking at the portraits and making adventurous interpretations (for Ming and Qing paintings that possibly were done for women, see Cahill 1-54). When Xianyu finishes the painting of Zhuang Yuan, her mother, Mrs. Lin, is greatly offended by the strength of the resemblance to the man who will be her father-in-law. In comparison, her friend Su Yunxian, who is also a reincarnated goddess, interprets the painting from a much more sympathetic point of view. "Seeing the portrait, Yunxian is completely enthralled, / thinking that she must have seen this person some place before. / Then she recalls (having seen him in the immortal world) the deity who resides on the holy Luofu Mountain. / It turns out that Zhuang Yuan looks very much like this deity, who is his father. / Yet how could Xianyu know of them both?" (2: 25, 210).

The portrait itself represents manifold narratives, portraying the painted person's face as a screen upon which the reader's imagination is projected. For Yunxian, Xianyu's sister and one of the reincarnated flower goddesses, the portrait evokes a connection between the feminine subject and the image. Misrecognizing the image as someone whom she had seen before, Yunxian gradually recognizes that the painted Zhuang Yuan very much resembles his deceased father, whom she had encountered during her past "life" in the heavenly realm. As Yunxian approaches the painting, the focus of her view moves from 性 (xing, form or body) of the painted image to its face, both of which resemble those of Zhuang Yuan's father. In Yunxian's viewpoint, the painting of Zhuang Yuan revives his father's image, folding the immortal realm into the ethereal world, suggesting the permeable boundary between these spaces. The same painted image, however, elicits a significantly different response from Xianyu's mother, who is offended by it. When Mrs. Lin comes to see the painting, she is astonished as soon as she enters the room. She asks her daughter if she owns a portrait of Mr. Zhuang. Xianyu replies that the portrait should look exactly like the real person. When Mrs. Lin hears this answer, she cannot suppress her anger, and throws the painting into the stove.

Scornfully, she laughs and turns to Xianyu: "Why is it that you were born with such a cold heart? How could you take so much liberty and stir his spirit by inscribing a real person?

In the past, when Xianyu fell seriously ill, the doctor said that it was because someone painted her image. Even though such sayings were only half-true, one should be wary of the magic powers of the portraits. When have you ever seen a depicted image painted the same as a real person? You might as well imitate the portraits of the deceased. How dare you paint a person who is still alive!"
The mother thinks to herself, "How detestable it is that she does not want to become a daughter-in-law of the Zhuang family, and dares to treat her father-in-law as a stranger. This is all because the General has been too lenient toward her. The father and daughter are both careless in action." (2: 25, 209)

In her eyes, the painting threatens the life of Zhuang Yuan, who has been away from home for years, and whose family does not know whether he is alive or dead. At this time, Xianyu has already declined the first marriage proposal of the Zhuang family and expressed her wish to stay unmarried all her life in order to attend to her parents. The portrait once again reveals Xianyu's disobedience to her parents' wish for her marriage, as she treats Mengyu's father, Mr. Zhuang, as an unrelated person instead of a father-in-law. Xianyu's mother scorns her daughter for her recklessness, saying, "Don't you know that with persistent persuasion, you could have changed your father's mind in having the portrait made? This should be the appropriate way of being a filially devoted child. Now you have behaved recklessly to please your father; I am afraid that you have been noted for the shame of unfiliality in heaven" (2: 25, 211). Underneath the mother's reproach is her disapproval of Lin's intention to display through the painting her determination to preserve her virginity. Lin confesses to her father, "I will wait on your side for the rest of my life. Even if the whole world changes, I shall not alter my mind" (2: 25, 213). The text vividly delivers the family dispute over the portrait, underlying which is the conflict between a woman's moral obligations and her free choice about marriage.

The chapter ends with the father's approval of Xianyu's plea to stay unmarried, for he perceives from his daughter's exceptional artistic skill that she was not born a common woman. Xianyu then asks her father to remove her name from the portrait of "three friends in winter," which is a pledge for the matrimonial bond between her, Mengyu, and Renfang. She asks that her name be replaced by that of Su Yunxian, who is her father's adopted daughter, and an ideal surrogate bride for Mengyu. The trope of replacement shows the woman's rejection of marriage and is frequently used in tanci. In Mengyingyuan, a flower goddess, Song Renfang, considers herself as a substitute for Xianyu in marriage (2: 22,153). Likewise, in Zaishengyuan, Lijun asks her sworn sister to stand in for her in an imperial marriage before dressing herself in men's clothing and fleeing her home. Praising Xianyu's ingenious plan, Zheng states, "A most outstanding person has a unique mind; in comparison with Xianyu, those women who gaze into the mirror and lament their loss of youth are quite derisible" (2: 25, 213). The author's mockery of sentimental women is reminiscent of the narcissistic Liniang, who laments the absence of her compassionate male companion and weans herself from grief. Nevertheless, the association between Xianyu and her painting possibly implies the artist's interest in exploring a moral identity that transcends social definitions of gender norms. The woman painter's alliance with the painted image is self-reflexive but not narcissistic; the painting of Zhuang Yuan manifests a surrogate identity of the heroine, who strives to explore a social identity outside regulated spaces.
Perceptive observers of these portraits may explore the painted images and discover disruptive potentials within them. The idealized portrayal of the male protagonist as a sympathetic viewer may be a projection of the author's desire for an expanded, appreciative audience. "Portrait of a Filial Heart" displays the artist's capability of establishing a moral authority, as well as her craving to find a surrogate social identity that can move beyond the social constraints on women and the norms of femininity. In *Mengyingyuan*, portraits are vehicles for the communication and representation of a feminine consciousness that finds expression through intersubjective encounters with viewers/readers. These portraits of women or by women manifest an innovative form of sympathetic spectatorship that constitutes and reinforces a gendered viewpoint, which can sometimes be adopted by a sympathetic male viewer/reader. This gendered perspective reflects that in the late imperial context, women's painted images are ridden with irony and mis/representation. Such mis/representations can be made by male painters who construct stereotypical images of women from a male-centered point of view. In earlier times, as in the story of Liniang, the woman internalizes the male other's viewpoint and mis/recognizes the self-portrait as her real self. Her "self" no longer exists for her, and is only brought to life through the male viewer's appreciative gaze. In either of these situations, the woman's image/self-image is misconstrued. In *Zaishenguan*, Lijun's self-portrait before the scene of her cross-dressing represents a pre-image, before she is "reborn" as a man, bespeaking her dilemma and lack of identity as a woman. *Mengyingyuan* modifies these scenarios about portraits/self-portraits, and implies that the portraits of women or by women can inscribe their authority and autonomous power. *Mengyingyuan* makes important contributions to the tradition of portrait narratives in *tanci* as well as in the larger context of late imperial literature. Zheng's text projects the possibility for portraits to be considered from a doubly gendered point of view, inviting sympathetic gazes from both men and women readers/viewers. The inner chambers, for the author, presents a space in which paintings of women or by women could be viewed and appreciated privately by their own eyes. Perhaps for contemporary readers, reading the work is not unlike General Li's experience of reading Xianyu's poems on legendary beauties. Their emotional bonds with the depicted characters outweigh their concern with the actual portrayal of the images of these outstanding women with unique minds, who lived in another place or another time. As General Li comments on Xianyu's poems, "Who would have expected to meet a person of the same understanding from another dynasty? / Not to mention that the brilliance of her diction and style is as such. / Transmitting a beauty's ice-pure heart and delicate appearance, / Are [indeed] more eloquent than a painting of her face [in reality]" (1: 13, 199).