Chapter Five: Cross-Dressing as a Collective Act in Xianü qunying shi (A History of Women Warriors)

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Chapter Five

Cross-Dressing as a Collective Act in *Xianü qunying shi* (A History of Women Warriors)

"Because of my pity for the imperiled and the weak in the world, / I depict the hearts of heroic and valiant women in the inner chambers. / Even though I cannot dispel the conventions of filial piety, faith, loyalty, and chastity, / these events of sadness and joy, departure and reunion, still have extraordinary meanings" (*Xianü* 5: 18, 23). These passionate lines are authorial insertions in a fin-de-siècle *tanci*, *Xianü qunying shi* (A History of Women Warriors, 1905, henceforth *Xianü*), which, according to the text's prefaces, was written jointly by three sisters, Yonglan, Youmei, and Shuzhu. This *tanci* depicts cross-dressed women as erudite scholars and heroic warriors who uphold the good, punish the evil, and save the country fearlessly at moments of national crisis. The cross-dressers' stories reveal the important theme of gender and the nation, providing a counterdiscursive interpretation vis-à-vis the male-centered nation-state discourses of Confucian society. *Xianü*, specifically, stands out in the way that it addresses and foretells issues about women's collective agency and empowerment, two profoundly significant themes to contemporary audiences. The text's depiction of a group of cross-dressed female characters represents a case of legacy writing in *tanci* fiction tradition and provides a source of empowerment and liberation. Simultaneously, the subversion of the gender hierarchy in *Xianü* presents a relatively optimistic vision when it comes to imagining possibilities for women's sexual, social, and political freedom.

Cross-dressing, as a narrative element, has come to be the carrier for these acts of progressive imagination since the late imperial period. Before the twentieth century, numerous works portrayed a male protagonist embarking on a journey towards happiness and fulfillment. Women *tanci* authors took up this narrative type, appropriating it and recasting the protagonists as women who leave the inner quarters and travel while dressed as men. These unconventional heroines generally cross-dress to escape from imposed marriage and to explore an alternative social identity outside the domestic sphere. In the fictional space, *tanci* authors depicted women's cross-dressing as a progressive practice verging on a challenge to the ideal of women's submissiveness as
described in the classics and ritual texts, as well as in the Confucian social philosophy of stable gender roles. Writing *tanci*, therefore, was itself an adventurous act for late imperial women authors, whose literary practices were under strict social regulation. They sallied forth with their heroic protagonists, as it were, and in so doing invited readers to envision a life of autonomy and freedom outside the domestic space.

Progressive impulses toward freedom and agency are well portrayed in *Xianü*. The text includes successive chapters composed by the three sisters in turn, telling the story of a group of erudite women in Zhejiang province who dress as men and explore adventurous lives outside the inner quarters. Little evidence is available about the historical audience of *Xianü*. The only remaining biographical information about the authors' lives comes from their brother's preface to the work and from a preface written by the husband of one of the authors. However, since the writers have all used pseudonyms, the authorship of the work cannot be verified in historical records or local chronicles. Unlike some cross-dressed heroines in earlier *tanci*, most cross-dressers in *Xianü* do not revert to their feminine identity, but continue to conduct their lives as men's social equals. In their private lives, cross-dressed women manage to marry other women and are sometimes married to more than one wife. Their former male fiancés are depicted as "male widows" who wait for the cross-dressers' return in vain. The authors' unconventional rendering of gender roles suggests that cross-dressed women of the time might have enjoyed more social tolerance and a certain freedom to exercise their social and political power.

Tolerance and freedom are not without their complications, however. Throughout the text, many scenes demonstrate cross-dressers' strategic renegotiation, circumvention, and transformation of conventional conceptions of femininity. One of the protagonists, Qing Shunxin (慶順馨), is abducted as a child on the evening of the Lantern Festival and is saved and adopted by a high-ranking official. She then changes her name to Qin Ling and becomes the first on the list of those passing the highest level of the imperial examinations. When, still dressed as a man, she again encounters her fiancé, Lin Mengyun (林夢雲), she refuses to reveal her true identity. Another female protagonist, Pang Yulong (龐玉龍), begins cross-dressing at birth with her mother's assistance to gain the right to her patrimony. Eventually she is married to a female friend who consents to her scheme of mock marriage. Likewise, another female protagonist, Su Zixiu (蘇子秀), has enjoyed dressing herself in male attire since childhood. After a family crisis, she is separated from her parents and adopted by a well-off family. To conceal her identity, Su Zixiu disguises herself as a man and, when she meets her fiancé again, denies her femininity. An exceptional case is the cross-dresser Mu Hualong (沐化龍), who is wedded to a female relative. Mu's fiancé Zheng Hua (鄭華), yearning to disclose Mu's identity, cross-dresses himself as a woman and marries Mu as "his" concubine. On the wedding night, Zheng Hua confronts Mu and succeeds in disclosing her true identity. The other female cross-dressers in the story, however, do not suffer the exposure of their identity, but marry one or even two wives, and become national heroes who rescue the country from subversion and rebellion. Like the earlier *tanci* work *Zaishengyuan*,...
Xianü qunyingshi is open-ended. In the last extant chapter, the author Youmei, after describing a major military victory of the cross-dressed General Su Zixiu, suggests that she cannot pass along the work to her eldest sister Yonglan, who is departing on a long journey to celebrate the birthday of their great-aunt. The story breaks off at this moment, and no further chapters of the work have been discovered.

The text embeds the story of Qin Ling in a conversation between two Daoist hermits in the beginning. From the conversation between the hermits, the reader learns that one of them once had a vision of the heavenly palace where rows of heavenly maids were paying tribute to Xi Wangmu, the Queen Mother of the West. Then the hermit saw the Queen Mother of the West giving out a command, and soon all the female deities had changed into male attire and were bowing to the Queen to thank her for her bounteouness. Several of these cross-dressed deities descended to earth alongside rows of children holding gilded tablets. Lines on the tablets state: "Three times [she] will rank high in the Imperial Exam, / and then she will exterminate the bandits at the frontier. / Rescuing people from danger and poverty, she frequently practices good deeds. / A female hero shall take the task of saving the nation. / Exceptional men and valiant women are bonded with faith and chastity" (1: 1, 4).

These inscriptions on the tablets are written in jie (gatha, a Buddhist verse), and they carry clues about the stories of the heroic women soon to be depicted, such as their passing the civil service exam, exterminating invading bandits, saving people from danger and poverty, and fulfilling certain missions for the country. The Queen Mother of the West, in Chinese mythology, is one of the most important goddesses of the Daoist pantheon, a supreme matriarch who governs the other female deities and resides on the sacred Kunlun Mountain. Told through the hermit's point of view, the story presents the female deities who cross-dress and descend to the Red Dust to affirm the good and rescue people from peril and poverty.

The text of Xianü is composed of 10 juan (volumes) for a total of 40 hui (chapters), 802 pages. Written in the late nineteenth century and later published in 1905, Xianü perhaps is addressed to a historical audience receptive to protofeminist writings. It was in the year 1905 that the feminist writer and social activist Qiu Jin returned to Beijing after receiving education in Japan and devoted herself to revolutionary activities against the late Qing government. Numerous literary works of this time display a distinctive progressive tendency, urging women to step out of the inner compounds and take an active role in social affairs. For example, in 1905, the famous writer Liu Yazi (柳亞子, 1887-1958) published an essay, "Lun nüjie zhi qiantu" ("On the Future of the Women's Realm"), in which he proposes, "We should not just imagine a women's world of virtuous mothers and gentle wives, but should rather envision a women's world of heroes and leaders. We should welcome and applaud the women's world, rather than denouncing and forsaking it" (57). The publication of this essay was the prelude to a series of progressive activities among women in early twentieth-century China. At the same time, male intellectuals, editors, and book publishers played an important role in editing and distributing protofeminist writings (see Jin Tianhe, The Women's Bell).
The title page of Xianü states that it was written by three anonymous sisters who identified themselves as 湘州女史 (Xiangzhou nüshi), which refers to female scholars from Xiangzhou. The mention of Xiangzhou suggests that these authors were from the Changsha area. One of the prefaces to the book was composed by a man with the literary name of Xin'An (心庵), the husband of Yonglan. The second preface was composed by the three women's youngest brother, whose pen name is Mengjü. Mengjü was also the editor of this work. The two prefaces reveal to contemporary readers that the four siblings were named after 梅 (mei, plum), 蘭 (lan, orchid), 竹 (zhu, bamboo), and 菊 (jü, chrysanthemum), four images in nature frequently evoked in traditional Chinese poetry, and in general representing moral qualities of fortitude, grace, uprightness, and purity.

Importantly, although some progressive male authors at this period also took to tanci to write tales, their stories were often much shorter in length, and purportedly were geared toward a male-oriented political ideal of China's nationalist rejuvenation and oftentimes represented women, including Chinese and Western heroines, playing orthodox gender roles or representing Confucian virtues of loyalty and chastity. A prominent example is the male writer and editor Zhou Shoujuan (1895-1968), who published a short tanci tale, Yanzhi xue (Rouge Blood), under the feminine pen name Qi Hong, which literally means "weeping blood." Strikingly dissimilar to these fin-de-siècle male authors' short tanci tales, Xianü manifests a distinctive inheritance of the stylistic features of women's traditional long tanci fiction, containing ample descriptions of the three sisters' domestic life, their exchange of and comments on one another's writings, and their individual reflections on the process of writing. Neither the authors nor the preface authors revealed real names and leave little biographical information beyond what is indicated in the two prefaces. However, the textual features of the entire tanci, its exuberant self-reflections by the three sisters, and its female-oriented descriptions of women's domestic life indicate a profound identification with feminine authorship and a distinctive inheritance of precursory women's tanci fiction conventions.

In his preface, Xin'An, the husband of Yonglan, offers a political reading of the tanci, emphasizing the association between tanci and women's self-empowerment in the early twentieth century. He suggests, "A woman in the boudoir might have wished to travel throughout the five continents and achieve fame that lasts for generations! Such desire would be a specificity of women's rights. This book is born with a similar ambition" (1: 1, 1). Xin'An further claims that the purpose of the book is "to stir and to rouse a new social inspiration" among both male and female readers (1: 1, 1). However, his choice of what to emphasize and what to play down are authorial decisions with significant ramifications. The "woman" represented in the editor's vision changes from "my" (the editor's) gendered, hierarchized "other" into "my" equal, or a political mirror image of the male narrator. The relation between the progressive male intellectual and the three anonymous women authors is an example of the cultural phenomenon that took place in turn-of-the-century China, in which male writers began to project gendered imaginations onto women. Xin'An's
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reading of the tanci, on the other hand, seems anachronistic. In contrast to other protofeminist tanci of the early twentieth century, such as Jingwei shi (Stones of the Jingwei Bird, 1905) and Faguo niuyingxiong tanci (Tale of a French Woman Hero, 1905), Xianü qunying shi displays strong continuity with antecedent tanci works in that it emphasizes gender masquerade and cross-dressing performance (on tanci and women's cultural sentiment at the turn of the century, see Hu, Siao-chen, "Zhixiu zhuiqiu" 89-128). For contemporary readers, the discrepancy between the progressive husband's preface and the women's text indicates that this tanci was published as an embedded narrative, for the main story is presented second-hand via an enclosing frame, the husband's preface. Although the book was published in 1905, just as China was on the threshold of modernity, the texts must have been composed much earlier, considering the remarkable length of the project and the assiduous process of writing as revealed by the authorial comments in the opening and closing sections.

The incongruity between the preface by Xin'An and the content of the work perhaps indicates that the publication of Xianü was targeted at progressive audiences of the time, although this cannot be proven, due to the scarcity of contextual information about this tanci. Importantly, during this time in China, many progressive feminist journals were also being published and circulated, such as 女報 (Nübao, Women's Journal; 1907), edited by the feminist revolutionist Qiu Jin (1875-1907) and 女蘇報 (Nü subao, Women's Jiangsu Journal; 1899), edited by Chen Xiefen (陳擷芬, 1883-1923) (Hu, Wenkai 955). In comparison with Xin'An's work, another preface to the tanci written by the authors' brother Mengjü (夢菊) provides more detailed biographical information about the authors and claims that the tanci would find its value when popularized among women in all corners of the world. He comments, "The writing was originally made to be enjoyed by women at home in their rooms, or offered as entertainment for parents. Yet a gentleman now submits the writing for publication, so that all the sisters under heaven can share the pleasure in reading it. All the parents on earth can share this work and be entertained. Evoking sympathy, admiration, fellow-feeling, or appreciation in readers, this work will bring reward to my three sisters" (1: 1, 1). The value of this tanci, as Xin'An puts it, lies in its capacity to evoke compassion and familial human emotions among its readers.

The narrative form of tanci is at once aesthetically appealing and morally instructive to women. Xin'An says, "When the writing is disseminated widely in the world and reaches every alley and every corner, women in the refined chambers will have new songs to chant. As for the events in ancient records and bamboo scrolls, one may still learn about them in official histories—but cannot directly experience them. So long, then, as the writing at hand has been endowed with color and sound, why does one need to prove with evidence whether it is true or false? If readers absorb its advocacy of the good and its condemnations of the evil, what need is there to question whether it is official history or tanci?" (1: 1, 2). This quotation emphasizes literary quality ("color and sound") and didacticism ("good and evil") as a means to legitimize tanci. Simultaneously, Xin'An's comparison of "official histories" with tanci that recount historical events is reminiscent of similar
discussions in Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji Monogatari*, or *The Tale of Genji*, a famous eleventh-century Japanese fiction work that explores the domestic lives of the governing class, as well as themes of love, filial loyalty, and family bonds. The male protagonist Genji, when discussing the difference between the fictional genre *monogatari* (tale) and "historical writings," comments that authors of *monogatari* use this literary form to portray historical incidents, with the didactic purpose of endorsing virtue as well as condemning vice and folly. Both the genres of *tanci* and *monogatari* demonstrate a blending of history and fiction: as in *monogatari*, the events portrayed by *tanci* are not pure fictional inventions, but are literary depictions based on historical incidents which are garnered in the text and reconfigured for various authorial purposes (Shikibu 501-02).

The phenomenon of women sharing common interests in *tanci* also underlies the authors' process of composing *Xianü*. One of the authors reflects on the scene of the three sisters writing and editing their works together, vividly depicting writing as part of their everyday activities.

In the inner chambers the sisters have no other distractions;
in talking about composing books we have increased interest.Dividing the lines and locating the insufficiencies,when it comes to the middle session the story is as confused as entangled hemp.Always contemplating polished lines and getting closer to perfection,we take pains to sift through the words.Debating and raising laughter,we compete in composing new lines and boast of our own writings.(10: 40, 56)

The responses among the three sisters are abundant in many of the chapters' opening and closing lines, demonstrating the multivocal nature of *Xianü*. In one chapter, the eldest sister discloses a nostalgic feeling for the years before her marriage. Her affective bond with her sisters as both siblings and fellow authors can be traced in the following lines: "My intelligent and talented sisters have finished their works,/ I am ashamed of my shallow knowledge, and my difficulties in finding good lines" (1: 1, 19). The literary exchange among the three sisters, as the authorial insertions reveal, develops a form of dialogic relation between authorial positions, which can be traced to the tradition of late imperial women's poetry exchanges. For women writers, poetic dialogues and literary exchanges offer an opportunity to experiment with alternative notions of selfhood and "refute the gender system to which they were subordinate" (Yang, Haihong 192).

In *Xianü*, specifically, the autobiographical narrative segments present details about how the authors produced, edited, and described their work. Each individual chapter is claimed to have been written by one of the three women and gestures toward the topic of the next chapter or volume. In comparison with previous *tanci* written by a single author with either a real or assumed name, *Xianü* reveals the process of women writing privately together, revising versions for publication. Hu
Ying points out that the role of the *tanci* narrator replicates the role of a historian in "explaining her [the woman character] to the world"; accordingly, resonance between the female community within the text and the one outside the text is achieved through the latter's reading of or listening to the *tanci* (Hu, Ying, *Tales of Translation* 153-97). *Xianü* likewise displays this meaningful exchange of support and encouragement among the three authors as well as between the writers and the readers. The text questions the proprietary figure of the modern author, as it includes work by the three anonymous women as well as readerly intervention by their female friends in the inner chambers. In the closing passage of one chapter, the narrator confesses, "Those who are hearing the story are eager to hear what happens afterward. / The author herself was even more enchanted than the audience. / Her heart entranced, she seemed to become a book worm. / Hurriedly she took to a work as difficult as catching the fireflies" (9: 36, 89). While the text resists established modes or conventions of reading by opening itself to plural interpretations, it also engages readers as producers of meaning. In a collaborative text, narratives and memories are threaded together, leaving gaps and openings for the other authors, the readers, and the editors to continue the narrative. The text can be read as a compendium of women's utopian desire for a communal identity, and its progressive potential rests in this ongoing process of collaborative writing.

The progressive potential of this *tanci* is centrally demonstrated in its vivacious depiction of cross-dressed women of outstanding literary and military gifts. Whereas these cross-dressers refuse to revert back to their feminine identity, their male companions spend years waiting for them in vain. The text's dramatic presentation of female scholars and "male widows" challenges the Confucian moral codes of chastity and feminine virtue and displays a dynamic understanding of gender relations in the late imperial social and cultural context. When the cross-dresser Su Zixiu is appointed prime minister and marries two women, her fiancé Wu Musu (吳穆蘇) waits for her return in futility. In the preface, the editor includes a poem that depicts a scene of Wu Musu offering a sacrifice for his lost fiancée by the Dongting Lake: "The male phoenix rests while the female travels afar, generating a thousand casks of regret. / Leaving his official position behind, he comes to commemorate his wife by the Dongting Lake. / In vain he composes lines of laments, / for the beloved one already accomplished such achievements and was appointed an eminent official" (*Xianü* 7).

"A thousand casks of regret" suggests a melodramatic expressive code, emphasizing the overflow of emotions. The cross-dresser's refusal to resume her feminine identity provokes an excessive emotional response from her fiancé (Thomas Elsaesser describes an "excess" in the "melos" or music of melodrama—a "melos" supplemented by extraordinary and often startling effects. In film, melodrama's "expressive code" of sound and light is sustained through the "exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern in human actions and emotional responses" [3]). This scene is reminiscent of *Zaishengyuan*, in which the cross-dressed Meng Lijun repeatedly denies her feminine identity to postpone the marriage event. Her lovesick fiancé Shaohua laments the loss of his missing fiancée day and night, going through the daily routine of...
grief rituals like an ordinary woman who suffers the loss of her husband. By making Shaohua play the role of a constant "spouse," the text mocks the Confucian code of women's chastity with a representation of male "widowhood." (In the text Shaohua has rejected remarriage for three years after Lijun's disappearance to keep his faithfulness to his fiancée. There are numerous examples of Shaohua's passionate confessions of his loyalty to Lijun, particularly in a number of comical scenes wherein he confronts the prime minister, that is, the cross-dressed Lijun, and tests "his" real identity.)

In these examples, the emotional expression of the male protagonist is endowed with a melodramatic quality, showing parody, derision or even the inversion of conventional gender roles. These quasi-theatrical scenes in tanci stage comical encounters between the cross-dresser and her husband and their inverted relationship (Hua and Wang, Mingqing xiqu 622). In Xianü, another riveting case of this kind takes place when a cross-dresser's fiancé, in order to reveal her identity, disguises himself as a woman and takes her as a concubine. The narrator comments, "The situation is reversed in comparison with their former engagement. / To prove their relationship, he comes up with a more refined plan. / In the flickering candlelight, their shadows sway; both of them are bashful. / Holding up nuptial wine cups, the two seem equally pensive. / Another day in the wedding chamber, they shall blame each other, / for the groom has married another groom" (7: 26, 38).

The representation of gender roles in this passage reveals a melodramatic confrontation between the cross-dressed "husband" and the disguised "wife" (7: 26, 36). On their wedding night, the fiancé Zheng Hua confesses to the cross-dresser Mu Hualong: "I see that you are in high spirits for taking a concubine. / How regretful! You have mistaken me for a woman. / Have you heard of the ancient story of Mulan? / Today I have inverted the situation and disguised myself as a woman" (7: 26, 38). The audience is confronted with a striking case of theatricality, and the challenge of deconstructing the opposition between presence and gendered representation. The cross-dresser Mu Hualong is capable of achieving a companionate marriage only through women's friendship: "It is only because the sisters have deep friendship, / that the disguised couple can joyfully celebrate a nuptial union" (7: 26, 39). The contrast between the disguised husband and the disguised wife shows yet another transformation of the "mock marriage." The irony is returned to the cross-dresser herself, who receives a shock when confronted with a male cross-dresser. The text reveals two distinctive cases of crossgender performance. Mu Hualong represents the idealized androgynous subject, who in turn represents a union of the handsome scholar and the talented beauty. The male cross-dresser Zheng Hua, who exaggerates the performance with his "glaring glances" and "eight-inch embroidered shoes," might be a parody of the effeminate male characters in Ming Qing fiction who adopt feminine personae (7: 26, 38).

This example of a man cross-dressing as a woman is reminiscent of many examples of temporary transgression and even inversion of gender codes in late imperial literature. For instance, a comic scene in the famous novel, *Flowers in the
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Mirror by Li Ruzhen (1763-1830), depicts a utopian 女兒國 (Nü'er guo, Women's Country) where men dress as women and are in charge of the household, while women dress as men and manage affairs outside the inner quarters. The cross-dressed male protagonist Lin Zhiyang (林之洋) travels through this country and is captured as a concubine for the empress. He, viewed as a beautiful woman, is then forced to dress in women's clothing and undergo foot-binding, ear-piercing, and many of the mutilating bodily practices that ordinary women suffered. The text is a vicarious satire of orthodox gender representation. The author claims that should his tale appear absurd, it is only because he hopes to bring the audience amusement. All the same, in the author's burlesque depiction of the Women's Country, gendered roles are still carefully preserved, even when genders of the characters assuming such roles have been subverted. Li Ruzhen's depiction of this place, where gender and dress codes are inverted, mediated through the perspective of the male protagonist, is a scathing satire of social reality through fictional representation.

If male cross-dressing in Flowers in the Mirror was largely depicted for a satirical purpose, a similar scenario in the Ming play 男王后 (Nan wanghou, The Male Queen; sixteenth century) carries stronger implications for gender transgression. Authored by Wang Jide (王驥德, 1540-1623), the play tells the love story of Emperor Chen Qian and a man, Han Zigao (韓子高), who dresses as a woman and becomes Emperor Chen's queen. The princess Yuhua (玉華) is enchanted by the new queen's beautiful appearance, and finds out that the queen is a disguised man. Determined to marry a handsome man like Han Zigao, the princess threatens to hang herself if Han does not agree to have an intimate relationship with her. When the emperor discovers the princess's relationship with his queen, he is moved by their love and encourages Han Zigao to marry Princess Yuhua. Zigao, who is viewed as more beautiful in women's dress, is wedded to the princess wearing embroidered clothes. The cross-dressed Zigao claims, "When I was the queen I would not reveal my lotus feet; now as the princess's husband, I am still wearing the embroidered dress. How difficult it is to distinguish the disguised from the original, the false from the real" (Wang Jide 28). As a transvestite, Zigao engages in feminine masquerade, playing the role of the emperor's submissive wife. Princess Yuhua, in contrast with Zigao's performance of femininity, shows a dramatically masculine trait, urging the cross-dressed Zigao to secretly marry her. Zigao's transvestite performance ridicules stereotypes of domesticated women conceived from a male perspective. Princess Yuhua, however, plays the role of the man in proposing marriage to Zigao and even threatens to commit suicide in front of him. The author, through the role of the king, comments that this event is an unusual tale for the entertainment of later readers. In sum, Zigao's case presents both male homoeroticism (between Zigao and the emperor) and "a subplot of female homoeroticism" (Volpp 11). The princess falls in love with Zigao while he is dressed in feminine attire, and she marries him while he is still in disguise (on male homosexual love, see Ng 76-89).

This fascination with male cross-dressing in drama recalls the representation of male homoeroticism in the tanci work 鳳雙飛 (Fengshuangfei, Flying Phoenixes;
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1899), written by nineteenth-century author Cheng Huiying 程惠英 (Hu, Wenkai, 647). This important tanci depicts numerous scenes of male homoeroticism and female same-sex desire. Wenjia Liu offers a valuable study of Feng Huiying's rewriting of male same-sex eroticism and the author's use of allegories as metaphorical social and political criticism (see Liu, Wenjia; Wu, Cuncun 3-7). In the text, one of the protagonists, Bai Ruyu, is depicted as an effeminate man whose toxic sexual appeal attracts the emperor and high officials and nearly topples the nation. In comparison with Zigao, Bai's crossgender performance does not involve disguising himself in women's clothing, but represents a man's social cross-dressing by openly taking up a position of the opposite gender. Like the "male queen" Zigao, the dashing Bai Ruyu changes gender roles and plays out the identity of femme fatale, to the extent of jeopardizing principle gender and social relationships. Cheng Huiying's extraordinary depiction of male transvestite performance is a meaningful intervention in the cross-dressing convention, showing the author's relative mobility in reflecting on gender issues through imaginary characters.

What distinguishes women's cross-dressing in tanci from these examples of male cross-dressing is that women's deployment of cross-dressing is an important means of social self-empowerment and demonstrates a remarkable spirit of heroism. In Xianü, one female character comments about the cross-dresser Zixiu, "Delicate yet capable of heroic deeds, / the refined lady could act in the position of a high official" (5: 19, 56). Such performances were widely presented in Ming and Qing women's writings and had their predecessors in fiction and in Chinese history. Zixiu's bride in the mock marriage, who had been a childhood friend of hers, exclaims when Zixiu reveals her cross-dressing: "Who would expect that you follow the example of the extraordinary woman of the Tang times? / Who would expect such multiple talents in literature and military affairs? / Who would expect that you were given such an eminent position in the royal palace and married a refined companion? / Who would expect that in selecting my companion, I am engaged to you, a woman?" (5: 19, 56).

For cross-dressers, the ideal of marriage is replaced by mock marriages forged of trust and friendship between women. The cross-dressed Zixiu, for instance, talks with her bride about the future of their marriage, saying,

Since, younger sister, I am only an impersonated man, you will not suffer damage and lose your pure integrity. Even if the titles are forged for the moment, how could this damage your chastity after all? If you follow a disguised scholar for the rest of your life, you will fulfill the wishes of your beloved parents, and avoid being talked about by petty people everywhere. I, your humble sister, have obtained eminence today and will never change this male clothing. . . .
After serving our parents until the end of their lives, we may go to the mountains and look for Buddhist mentors. On that heavenly terrain, we will find an idyllic cave, where we shall take joy in learning the art of alchemy.
This is much superior to those women who depend on men for fortune, and spend their entire lives in the silk and brocade chambers. (5: 19, 57)

Here Zixiu's suggestion to her bride about leaving the world and pursuing immortal happiness through alchemy is reminiscent of women's youxian shi, or poetry on roaming as a transcendent, a poetic subgenre which demonstrates some women's impulses to search for a kind of immortality "defined and poeticized by women themselves" (Wang, Yanning 102). Scholar Yanning Wang offers a study of youxian (遊仙) poems by Qing women authors, specifically those poems on the theme of nü youxian (女遊仙), or women roaming as transcendents. Wang argues that youxian poems provided a unique literary space for women's poetic and autobiographical voices in the late imperial period, reflecting women writers' increasing consciousness of self. In Xianü, women's aspiration to transcend their earthly yokes and achieve spiritual freedom strikes a chord with the female cross-dresser's desire to explore a pleasurable and rewarding life outside the domestic sphere. Like legendary female transcendents, the cross-dresser demonstrates a kind of embodied agency in late imperial women. In Xianü, this trend of women aspiring toward immortality even replaces the conventional plot ending in marriage. As the cross-dressed Zixiu envisions it, the two women in mock marriages can cultivate themselves through exercises to pursue the pleasure of immortality, instead of being yoked to their domestic duties.

These same-sex unions or mock marriages have a long tradition that can be traced to previous tanci works such as Zaishengyuan (Destiny of Rebirth) and Fengshuangfei (Flying Phoenixes). Zixiu, by reconfiguring herself as a husband and mate, empowers herself within the structure of marriage and subverts many constraints on her freedom. Zixiu's bride Xuejuan, whose former fiancé passed away before their marriage, determines to keep her chastity but is forced by her parents to marry Zixiu as "his" concubine. There is also a comic scene in which Zixiu, before revealing her identity, teasingly approaches Xuejuan, asking for sexual intimacy. Mimicking the tone of a libertine, Zixiu says to Xuejuan,

Even if you want to keep your chastity,
what fame and fortune can you gain from it?
Although I myself have no good looks and outstanding talents,
at least I am a good match for you.
Since we have completed the nuptial ceremony,
we should be a well-matched couple,
like two lotus flowers born from the same root.
In the Tiantai Mountains the legendary meal of huma seeds is ready for us
[to taste];
we will not be like the self-deluded Liu Chen who just happened to
encounter the [female] immortals by himself.
I bid you take advantage of this marriage and become my mate.
If you return home, both Mr. Zhang and our mother will be disgraced.
(5: 19, 58)

The "meal of huma seeds" in the above passage alludes to a legend in the East Han period (206 BCE-220 CE). Two men, Liu Chen (劉晨) and Ruan Zhao
(阮肇), enter the Tiantai (天臺) Mountains to collect medicinal herbs. They meet two female immortals, who invite them to their lodgings and offer them a bountiful feast, including rice with the seeds of huma (胡麻), dried goat meat, beef, and fresh peaches. After what had seemed like half a year's time, Liu and Ruan return home, only to discover that seven generations have passed by and that they are left alone in the world (Li, Fang, Taiping yulan 61: 383). Zixiu mockingly pleads for sexual intercourse and rationalizes "his" position by arguing against the social custom of women's chastity. Zixiu's impersonation of the male libertine is so convincing that Xuejuan becomes enraged and attempts to commit suicide to preserve her chastity. This episode is a mockery of the practice of women's chastity-related suicide. And as luck would have it, the women characters' virtue is preserved and left indisputable, as Xuejuan marries a woman, and both of them are able to keep their virginity.

In a conversation, male characters Lin Mengyun and Zheng Hua reveal their suspicions that Mu Hualong might be the cross-dressed fiancée of Zheng Hua. Lin Mengyun cautions Zheng that since Miss Mu has already married Mu Hualong, "the two ladies must now enjoy each other's company all the more, / just like the legendary empresses Mo and Huang living in the same household" (7: 26, 30). Tradition holds that Empress Mo was the wife of the ancient Yellow Emperor, who reigned from 2697 to 2597 BCE. Empress Huang was said to be the wife of Emperor Shun, who reigned from 2255 to 2195 BCE. In the text, Lin Mengyun, who had long thought that Qin Ling was his cross-dressed fiancée Qing Shunxin, helps Zheng disclose Mu Hualong's identity as an example to Qin Lin. He thinks to himself, "Today women are really deviant, / and all think of becoming officials at the court. / What could I do to disclose Miss Shui's identity / so that the others will be alarmed while watching from a distance?" (7: 26, 30).

Cross-dressing for Qin Ling and Mu Hualong is a marker of a newly acquired identity. Qin Ling is physically strong and well-versed in literature. "Unlike the other delicate women, / she was born with a pair of strong arms and has greater strength over others. / An exceptional woman who could remember writings with a glance, / she even surpasses the talented poet Xie Daoyun" (1: 1, 2). These cross-dressed heroines are not only talented scholars and courageous military leaders, but are also endowed with multiple talents. Su Zixiu knows the art of divination and can anticipate the outcomes of battles. The text depicts her as a female counterpart to the famous military leader and scholar Zhuge Kongming (181-234 CE) (6: 22, 26). In the following scene, for example, Su Zixiu and Pang Yulong, the two runner-up candidates in the civil service examination, admire Qin Ling's handsome looks and accomplishments in martial arts, not knowing that Qin is also a cross-dressed woman.

The Second and Third Candidates in the Exam are also pondering in private.

"Who would recognize me as a woman now? 
At last I am able to raise my chin, release a breath, and act as an exceptional hero. 
How detestable are those common people who ridicule women as not human beings. 
In my view, the wise and the foolish are not equivalent;
even among men themselves, not everyone can be the same.
Some men are bandits and thieves, some men are upright and prominent officials.
Among women, there are exemplary women like Mulan and Huang Chonggu;
some are ignorant and vulgar shrews.
Men and women can be both virtuous and ignorant;
how could one use a single standard in assessing them?
One exceptional case is my honorable brother Qin Ling,
whose good looks ranks first among all the officials and is even hard to find among women.
Moreover, his expertise in martial arts and heroism has made him a true pillar of the nation.
Yet even he does not know about my secret,
that a woman could also stride in the lofty sphere of eminence. (6: 23, 34)

The above passage in Xianü is written in the first-person, simulating the combined voices of the two cross-dressed women. Remarkably, the passage contains protofeminist reflections on gender equality, referring to the famous heroines Mulan and Huang Chonggu. The narrator foregrounds a woman's perspective on gender difference, denouncing prejudice against women's capabilities. The cross-dresser Qin Ling is considered an exception among men, who surpasses others in good looks and expertise in martial arts. Qin Ling's name and character suggests that she might be based on the heroic Ming female general Qin Liangyu (1574-1648), who surpassed her male peers in skills of horse archery and martial combat, and who also had outstanding talent for poetry. In her lifetime Qin succeeded in several battles against local warlords in southwest China and later led battles against the invading Manchurians. Unaware of the others' real gender, each of the three cross-dressed women are awed by the others' looks and achievements. At the moment of the cross-dresser's misrecognition of Qin Ling, one can detect the theatrical impulse of irony in the characterization of the cross-dresser and the text's exaltation of the androgynous personality. The text shows a comic paradox in which the cross-dresser Qin Ling plays the role of a nonmale for the other two cross-dressers, who perceive "him" as such. On the surface, Qin is an exception among men; underlying the text's ironic representation, "his" appraisal of the masculine role makes Qin neither female nor male. "His" feminine appearance passes flawlessly as the effeminate countenance of a refined scholar, suggesting an androgynous subjectivity that eludes the orthodox definition of gendered subjectivity.

Current scholarship on late imperial women's cross-dressing focuses on the liberatory potentials of fictional women to women readers who aspire toward alternative lives outside the domestic sphere. Dorothy Ko, in her study of seventeenth-century women authors, points out that "instead of challenging the ideology of separate spheres by mixing and redefining gender roles, these heroines encouraged their female readers to aspire to be more like men." Ko points out that the proliferate depictions of male-looking heroines in dramas and stories show no more than women's temporary transgressions. Ko notes, "Male concerns in public domains are still
considered as superior." Tales of gender inversions "perpetuate the prevailing gender ideology" without fundamentally challenging the ideology of separate spheres of the inner and the outer or the domestic and the social (Ko, Teachers 140). An important result of these visionary women authors' interventions is that their stories of cross-dressers break down "the century-old divisions between inner and outer and between male and female spheres" (Ko, Teachers 142). Likewise, Siu Leung Li, in a study of cross-dressing in Chinese opera of the Yuan period (1279-1368), makes the proposition that women's cross-dressing in performance texts reveals an "interactive negotiation between subversion and containment" and the vexing desire circulated between stage enactment and the audience (Li, Siu Leung 22). Ko and Li both raise the question of women's desire to question and disrupt the ideological distinction between spaces of the inner and the outer. At the same time, uch progressive endeavors are still conditioned and constrained by the authors' historical and social conditions in the patriarchal society. The proposition of "masculine" women characters from late imperial literary works by and large reinforces the division between the male and female worlds, instead of completely redefining the relations between these gendered spheres (Ko, Teachers 140).

The above considerations raise further questions about how issues of androgyrous gender identity should be understood in the late imperial social and historical context. Androgyny, characteristic of cross-dressed men and women, is significantly depicted in late imperial literature as a gender subjectivity alternative to the male and female binary gender system (see Zhou, Zuyan). Depictions of androgynous heroines are profuse in tanci by women. The renowned Zaishengyuan depicts Meng Lijun, who cross-dresses to escape from marriage. Xianü, in comparison, represents a group of women who disguise themselves as men and surpass their peers on the imperial exam. In tanci, cross-dressing was often invoked by late imperial women authors to depict characters who actively take part in constructing their own image by drawing on disparate gender roles. Cross-dressing is a strategy for women in literary works, as it was in real life, to renounce marriage (often supplemented by "mock marriages" between women privately agreeing to play the role of an ideal couple), and a way for women to renounce their sexuality.

All the women cross-dressers refuse to resume wearing their feminine attire in the text. For example, when Qin Ling is confronted by her fiancé Lin Mengyun, who, to test Qin Ling's true identity, claims that he will abide by their engagement for the rest of his life, Qin Ling senses Mengyun's intention and replies, "I will give you my advice. In the world there are monumental plates that are erected for chaste widows, but I have not seen any temple built in honor of a loyal husband" (5: 18, 29). This passage contains an explicit mockery of the Confucian doctrine of women's chastity, as it replaces the traditionally passive woman with a husband who awaits her return with chaste piety. The woman flees from her socially prescribed role through cross-dressing and cleverly rejects her fiancé's consent to marry. The frustrated Lin Mengyun thinks, "How regretful; she is now neither alive nor dead, leaving no trace in the world. / How ashamed I am of my own reputation for talent; she is really more
intelligent than I" (5: 18, 32). The cross-dresser transcends social and sexual norms, yet paradoxically triggers complicated patterns of desire. Moving across social and economic boundaries, she comes to life through the text's dramatic representation.

Like Qin Ling, another character, Su Zixiu, who also cross-dresses, refuses to admit her true identity to her fiancé. During childhood Zixiu is separated from her family in an accident and is later rescued by a high official. She then dresses as a man and passes the civil service exam. Years later, Zixiu meets her fiancé Wu Musu, who immediately suspects Zixiu's real identity. However, Zixiu refuses to admit her true identity in front of Wu Musu. On the other hand, when Zixiu's mother finds out that the young official is her long lost daughter, Zixiu pleads with her not to disclose the secret, asking her to pretend that she is still suffering from her daughter's disappearance. Then, Zixiu pleads with her mother to persuade her fiancé (who is now her male peer in the palace) to look for another wife and stop interrogating her. Exasperated, she even threatens to commit suicide: "If someone dares to reveal your daughter's secret of cross-dressing, / I will immediately take up the sword and slit my own throat" (5: 19, 59). The text demonstrates a resonance with the motif of women's suicide in late imperial literature. Many late imperial literary works reflect the social custom of chastity-related suicide, such as widows committing suicide after their husbands' deaths, sometimes at the prompting of the deceased husbands' families (for a detailed discussion of this topic, see Mann, "Widows" 37-56; Judge, Precious Raft 34-59). Yet, here, this convention is evoked in a different situation: the woman threatens to kill herself not in defense of her chastity, but to resist the confinement of marriage, insisting that she would prefer death to losing the freedom she has when she is disguised as a man. When challenged by her fiancé's inquisitive questions about her real identity, Zixiu ponders her situation. She thinks to herself, "If you want me to change into feminine attire, / that will only take place when heaven topples down and the earth overturns. / Those people are most despicable who say that women should follow the doctrines and not venture to make a career like men out in the world. / I would rather rely on my talents and enjoy fortune, / and entirely dismiss the fact that I was born a woman. / I have learned all kinds of arts and have fortunately had my name among the first few in the Exam. / I take a vow that I will not change my attire again. What can you do about me then?" (9: 34, 24).

These audacious statements strongly resonate with the famous Lijun in Zaishengyuan, who, when recognized by her parents, rationalizes her unwillingness to go back to a woman's life. She defends her choice in the name of filial piety, attempting to persuade her parents to keep her sexual identity a secret.

Even though you would like me to return to your side, I can only end up marrying into another household and serving the parents-in-law.
What is the benefit of this for my own parents? Why don't you just let me go on and live the life of a man? . . .
Even though I was born a woman, now I enter the royal palace and serve the Emperor. . . .
What is the need for me to be married? 
Even the place of the Empress herself could not fit into my expectations!
(11: 44, 761)

These defiant statements in Zaishengyuan invited criticism from tanci authors of the time and in later generations. Perhaps because Chen Duansheng was incapable of balancing the character's personal aspirations with the readers' desire to see Lijun's reunion with her fiancé, she left the work unfinished; it ends after Lijun's sexual identity is accidentally disclosed. Modern adaptations of Zaishengyuan in local operas and film and television dramas have presented multiple interpretations of Lijun's fate. For both Meng Lijun and Su Zixiu, cross-dressing represents the rebirth of a new life. These stories show that in the late imperial social context, cross-dressing was an imaginary means for women to escape prearranged marriage and explore freedom outside the domestic sphere. However, under the pervasive influence of Confucian ideology, ordinary women's desire to have an independent life was by and large frustrated by social reality. In Bishenghua (Blossom from the Brush, preface dated 1857), the heroine, Jiang Dehua, is nearly compelled to commit suicide when she is forced to enter the palace as a royal maid. She is saved by a fox spirit and then cross-dresses as a man to explore a new life. However, a comparison between Meng Lijun and Jiang Dehua shows that women cross-dressers' presence is still constrained by the pervasive Confucian ideology. Lijun is nearly sentenced to death when the emperor discovers her cross-dressing. The open ending of the work shows that the cross-dresser, once disclosed, has no space of her own outside the inner quarters. Jiang Dehua, even though she is disguised as a man, has internalized the moral codes of virtue and chastity and is transformed into an exemplary nü daoxue, that is, a female Confucian intellectual. Even in her male disguise, she adheres to feminine virtue and will not be touched by men, nor will she eat at the same table with men. In Jiang's case, cross-dressing is not radically transgressive, but rather shows the reinforcement of traditional gender ideologies. When Jiang's cross-dressing is discovered, the emperor orders her to marry her former fiancé Lin Wenbing. Jiang then is transformed into a virtuous woman who devotes her talent to governing the household and settling disputes between the concubines (a biography of Qiu is in Ye, Dejun 743-44; see also Hu, Wenkai 402-03).

As indicated by the title 俠女群英史 (Xianü qunying shi, A History of Women Warriors), women's cross-dressing is often related to heroism in the text. In chapter 32, volume 8, when a rebellion against the emperor bursts out, the protagonist Wen Xiaxian disguises herself as a golden-faced deity, sneaks into the palace, and rescues the infant prince from the rebellious armies. The textual depiction is imbued with fantastic color. While the besieged palace falls into chaos, "Suddenly a deity descends from the roof dressed in a scarlet short jacket and pants; / he has three strands of beard on a face of golden color. / In a thunderous voice, he says, 'Don't be afraid. / I am a deity who comes to rescue the prince.' / Upon saying this, he hurries to approach the Queen, / and hastens to carry the Prince in his hands. / As if flying, he steps outside; / in a light jump he vanishes like a cloud" (8: 32, 85).
The passage depicts the protagonist as a 俠女忠臣 (xianü zhongchen, female knight and loyal official) who saves the prince in a moment of national crisis and secures the future of the country. The text might have been influenced by stories about the female knight-errant in traditional Chinese narratives, and is reminiscent of the swordswomen tales in the late imperial vernacular tradition. In late imperial fiction, a famous example of swordswoman is Nie Yinniang in Strange Tales in a Chinese Studio. In the text, the authors possibly adopted the tradition of female swordsmen in depicting the cross-dressers to emphasize the heroism of the women (for a study of female knights in traditional Chinese literature, see Altenburger 2009). Wen Xiaxian, the heroine in the above passage, also cross-dresses as a swordsman to rescue an honest scholar who is persecuted by a scheming high official. In these two examples, the cross-dresser displays a spirit of heroism, loyalty, and moral uprightness. The subject of the book, as one of the authors, Yonglan, states, is "the loyal and chaste noble heroes, / the heroic women who support the poor and rescue the endangered" (4: 13, 1). In male attire, the woman explores the variations of gender roles and demonstrates an emancipating power to rescue the weak and redress injustice.

Women's cross-dressing is not unique to tanci, but has been demonstrated in many analogous depictions in late imperial history and literature. An example in fiction is a huaben story entitled "The Maid Li Xiuqing Becomes the Swear-Sister of the Chaste Maid Miss Huang," which appears in the short story collection 喻世明言 (Yushi mingyan, Illustrious Words to Instruct the World; 1620) (For a translation of this text, see Feng Menglong, Stories Old and New). The author Feng Menglong (1574-1647) depicts a cross-dressed heroine named Huang Shancong (黃善聰). A merchant's daughter, Shancong cross-dresses to travel with her father. On their journey, her father falls ill and passes away, yet Shancong keeps up her disguise to preserve her virginity. After seven years, Shancong is reunited with her family. Her relatives think that she must have become the secret wife of her traveling companion, Li Xiuqing (李秀卿). To prove her purity, Shancong consents to a private test, the result of which shows that she is still a virgin. The story ends with Shancong's marriage to Li Xiuqing, to which the family has given their blessing. The narrator's stress on female chastity outweighs the text's acclamation of female heroism: "For seven years," the narrator explains, "she cross-dressed as a man, without showing any tiny trace; upon her return [to the family] she held her cool and unstirred heart in solitude. I compiled this tale to educate those in the inner chambers, and cleanse the tales of romance and love" (Feng Menglong, Yüshi mingyan 541). Shancong is compared to heroic cross-dressers such as Hua Mulan and Huang Chonggu (early tenth century), who according to the narrator are "disguised men without manliness, real women who wear males' hairdress" (530).

Huang Chonggu in Feng's story is a well-known woman who disguises herself as a literati scholar and impresses the minister with her talent in writing poetry. When the minister proposes a marriage between Huang and his own daughter, Huang writes a poem, "辭蜀相妻女詩" ("Ci shuxiang qinü shi," "Declining the Proposal of the Minister of the Shu Kingdom That I Marry His Daughter"). In the poem
she confesses her true sex: "If my lord wishes to have me as a son-in-law, I wish heaven could change me into a man instantly" (Peng 799: 8995). Huang's legacy can be traced in numerous examples of female cross-dressing in late imperial women's poetry, playwriting, and fiction. For instance, a late eighteenth-century woman poet named Shen Xiang describes a portrait of the courtesan poet Liu Shi, in which Liu cross-dresses as a young scholar to pay a personal visit to a male scholar. In Shen Xiang's poem about this painting, she says, "Who can tell the truth from the appearance of a person after all? Beauty or scholar, both are now seen as one" (Shen Xiang 15a). This unique example shows Liu Shi's cross-dressed image, which recalls other similar portraits of cross-dressed women. In the Ming play *Qiaoying* (The Image in Disguise) by the woman poet and playwright Wu Zao, the protagonist Xie Xucai cross-dresses and paints a miniature of herself in official's robes. Describing herself as a latter-day Qu Yuan, Xie expresses her frustration that the disjunction between herself and her times prevents her from fully employing her talents. "Alas! Fettered by my physical form, I can only sigh all alone over my sadness. If one considers the matter carefully, though, while miraculous transformations depend on Heaven, the initiative rests with oneself. That is why a few days ago I painted a small portrait of myself dressed in male attire" (132). Wai-Yee Li suggests that the author's purpose for writing this play is "explained by her frustrations with the limitations imposed by her gender role and her wish to transcend them" (Li, "Heroic Transformations" 367). This sense of frustration is similarly shared by the heroine Du Lanxian in the play *Lihuameng* (Dream of the Pear Flower; 1840) by He Peizhu. In the play Du makes a self-portrait of her female image before cross-dressing as a man. Taiwanese scholar Lijian Wang suggests that in both plays the self-portrait reflects women's sexual displacement and self-estrangement in Confucian society (Wang, Lijian 82-89). It should be noted that such examples of women performing men's roles are not rare in late imperial women's drama. An important example is *Yuanyangmeng* (Dream of the Mandarin Ducks) by Ye Xiaowan, which portrays three female immortals who, following men's ways, secretly become sworn brothers and offend the West Palace Empress (*Wumengtang ji* 1: 1-16). As a punishment for their offense, they are incarnated as male scholars and sent to the earth to experience the hardship of men's mortal life. The author, through the incarnated male scholars, voices women's grievances against social constraints, and their aspiration for an imaginary realm of immortality and freedom. These earlier examples of women's cross-dressing set the groundwork for later *tanci* narratives that encompass a rich exploration of women's capacity to perform as the equals of men.

The legacy of female heroism, demonstrated by these cross-dressed women in fiction and history, presages women's activism in real life in turn-of-the-century China. An important example is the protofeminist writer and revolutionist, Qiu Jin. Qiu Jin was a prolific writer in many genres and composed an unfinished *tanci* entitled *Jingwei shi* (Stones of the Jingwei Bird; 1905), which was published in the same year as *Xianü*. The temporal setting and plot of these two works, however, are vastly different. *Jingwei shi* depicts a group of young women who escape from their
domestic bonds and travel abroad to Japan to study modern culture. These heroines, like the author herself, dedicate themselves to advancing the cause of women's liberation on a national scale. In her lifetime, Qiu frequently disguised herself as a man and actively participated in social and political events. In 1907, when she became the principal of the Datong Normal School in Hangzhou, she trained female students in military gymnastics and was known as an infamous woman who rode through the town dressed in men's clothing (Judge, *Precious Raft* 219). Qiu Jin's activism, as Joan Judge argues, is reflective of her self-positioning as one of the "heroic educators of Chinese women" and her effort to inscribe a new identity in national history that transcends the identity of "woman." In her life time, Qiu Jin posed for photos while dressed in Chinese men's dress and Western men's suits, and successfully "adopted masculine skills, from riding astride on horseback to powerful oratory" (Judge, *Precious Raft* 219). Compared with her predecessors in *tanci*, Qiu's cross-dressing takes on multiple forms, fashioning her identity as a "new-style heroine" whose aspirations are channeled through the cause of nationalism (Judge, *Precious Raft* 218-20). Qiu's personal undertaking brought out the progressive potential of the Mulan legend with vigor. Such tales of cross-dressing, legendary or historical, question and destabilize conventional social gender roles and suggest new possibilities for women's social and political empowerment.

How do the readings of cross-dressing in *tanci* amplify contemporary readers' understanding of subjectivity and gendered spectatorship in and beyond late imperial and early modern China? How do the performances of cross-dressers expose ways in which gender roles can be negotiated and reconstructed? As the text demonstrates, the female-to-male cross-dresser in particular becomes an eroticized character and has to adopt vigorous, spirited, and even exaggerated actions. Mu Hualong, who becomes one of the top three candidates in the civil service examination, "always felt abashed, and behaved with a certain gentleness. / She was afraid that people might see her femininity through her demeanor, / so she could only pretend to imitate the liberal behavior of men" (4: 14, 25). The woman's disguised body reveals the ironic relation between seeing and acting. "He" observes and imitates men, learns from this observation, and responds to the gaze of others. "His" performance, consequently, is constructed and modified in an interactive relationship with the observing audience.

This dynamic interaction between cross-dressed women and the observing audience in the text sometimes exhibits great dramatic irony. When Qin Ling ranks first in the civil service exam and becomes the top candidate, the emperor's brother Lord Zhongjing proposes to marry his daughter to Qin Ling, knowing that Qin already has a fiancée (who is actually Qin's own cousin, but who does not know about Qin's real identity). Finally, Qin Ling is persuaded to take both women as "his" wives in a joint wedding ceremony. On Qin's way home, the people in the streets vie with each other to see the handsome top candidate, praising him as "outstanding both in appearance and talent, and carrying true loyalty; / in the Hall of the Golden Throne, he dared to reject the Emperor's marriage arrangement for him" (4: 14, 24). Despite the admiring...
gaze of the crowd, Qin's mind is peppered with worries. "He" thinks, "The wedding night is in just a few days. / Who knows how I should make arrangements for two wives?" (4: 14, 24). This scenario is a satirical take on the polygamous marriage system in which the husband is married to several wives. Even though the marriage is one between "phony phoenixes," the cross-dresser manages to establish a harmonious relationship with his two "wives." On the first family gathering the morning after the wedding, the two wives, gazing at the handsome Qin, "could not help but become overjoyed, pondering, 'No wonder he has been regarded as the most affable and ideal potential husband'" (4: 15, 39). In comparison with the mock marriage between Meng Lijun and Liang Suhua in Zaishengyuan, the cross-dressers' marriages in Xianü may or may not involve women's mutual understanding or knowledge of the "husband's" disguise. In this example, the cross-dresser's performance is so powerful that even the wives are convinced and believe "him." The polygamous marriage system is even exploited to the cross-dresser's advantage. Not only does Qin Ling enjoy the highest authority in the house, but "his" social identity as a married "man" further prevents the suspicious fiancé Lin Mengyun from probing into "his" sexual identity. Qin's cross-dressing performance is carried out with almost full approval from the people around him.

This interaction between cross-dressed women and their fiancés who recurrently evaluate and attempt to identify their sexuality creates many moments of tension and melodrama. After Mu Hualong's cross-dressing is disclosed, she is exempted from punishment by the emperor, but has to marry her former fiancé. The name Hualong (化龍) means "transforming into dragon," suggesting a woman changing into a man, since the symbol of the dragon represents masculinity (just as the phoenix represents femininity). Seeing Mu's reversion to a feminine identity, Lin Mengyun becomes all the more anxious to prove that Qin Ling is his former betrothed companion. He ponders, "Even though I tested him several times, / his responses were always as sharp as sword blades" (8: 32, 86). Nor does his behavior resemble that of a woman in close examination. (A related fact is that Pang Yulong's wife is Wu Musu's sister. It happens that Wu's sister is devoted to Daoist practice and rejects sexual intimacy with men. This proves to be convenient for Pang Yulong, who does not have to sleep in the same room at night with "his" wife. While the couple lives in harmony, Wu, driven by anxiety, suspects that his own sister has become a conspirator with Pang and intentionally has kept him from knowing Pang's true sexuality.) After all, how could a cross-dresser live in a house with two wives so effortlessly? Likewise, Wu Musu, who is the fiancé of the cross-dresser Pang Yulong, suspects Pang is his betrothed bride, but can not imagine "how a woman dared to complete the matrimonial ceremony with another woman" (4: 16, 68). The moment is reminiscent of Xu Wei's play adapted from the Ballad of Mulan, in which the androgynous protagonist confesses, "For seventeen years I was a girl, for twelve years I have been a man. Under the gaze of tens and thousands of people, who could really tell whether I am a man or a woman? Now it is evident that man or woman cannot be distinguished with eyes" (Xu Wei, Ci Mulan 224). In Xianü, the literary figure of Mulan has found
rebirth in the group of women cross-dressers who blend characteristics of male and female genders, striving to explore the social space as men's equals.

To sum up, in late imperial China, *tanci* authors wielded their brushes to enact new forms of identities by positioning the personal within the fictional realm and reconfiguring moral commitments and desires through memorable storylines. The author becomes a speaking subject and conceptualizes the self by exploring multiple possibilities of subjectivity. For women, writing in this textual form is an audacious choice, showing their desire to represent a space in which traditional definitions of womanhood can be displaced and unconventional gender identities can be imagined. The text of *Xianü* demonstrates the tension between the cross-dressers and the public, who probe into and repeatedly test the masquerading women. However, other than Mu Hualong, none of the women cross-dressers are exposed. Su Zixiu and Qin Ling become high military officials and play a fundamental role in putting down several regional rebellions. Pang Yulong is married to a princess and becomes the emperor's son-in-law. In comparison with Meng Lijun, who is left with no choice but to revert back to a woman's life, the women cross-dressers in *Xianü* are depicted as having more freedom and independence to pursue their lives unconfined. If earlier *tanci* before the twentieth century, such as *Zaishengyuan*, display an imagining of women's alternate lives in male disguise outside the inner chambers, *Xianü* impresses the readers with its insistence that cross-dressed women can find their place in the social sphere, and that marriage may not be an obstacle to women exercising their intellectual powers. Conversely, the authors clearly invite comparison of these cross-dressers by having one woman found out and the others not. This comparison gives readers a critical indication that not all women can fully embrace such ambitious lives in an unyielding social world which still awaits transformations in the generations to come.