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

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Published by Purdue University Press

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Purdue University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/42550.
Conclusion

This study reviewed five novel-length *tanci* works to highlight the theoretical themes in these narratives, including cross-dressing, portraits and self-portraits, authorial insertions, empathetic identification, and gendered citizenship. These narrative features link the genre of *tanci* to late imperial Chinese literature of other genres, manifesting women authors' strategic appropriation and reinvention of traditional narrative motifs for the sake of self-empowerment. Probing into selected *tanci* texts from the late imperial to the early twentieth century from a historically situated perspective, this book avoids imposing preconceived historical or genealogical structures onto the development of this evolving narrative form that have been co-opted by the authors of the five *tanci*. *Tanci* incorporates common features and gives expression to many key elements in women's writings in other genres such as poetry, fiction, drama, and travel accounts. Though this narrative form yields possibilities for women's freer expression in speech, women authors of *tanci* inexorably encountered the same historical and social norms as women writers of other genres. Instead of seeking to make a genre-based claim about women's expressed desires for a greater degree of agency, this book project endeavors to showcase the same anxieties, challenges, and yearnings for self-expression that *tanci* authors shared with late imperial women authors of other genres. The current project, therefore, seeks to contribute to a historically situated understanding of women's writing conditions in late imperial China.

The chapters of this book project the ongoing process in which *tanci* authors envisioned new forms of female subjectivities over the last three centuries. The first two chapters on *tanci* novels *Zaishengyuan* and *Bishenghua* considered the scenario of cross-dressing, which, in the fictional realm, both liberates women and allows them to explore the largely male social territory outside, and represents these disguised heroines as male substitutes whose agency is often limited and transitory. In chapter 1, my analysis considered the classic *tanci* work *Zaishengyuan* (Destiny of Rebirth) by the eighteenth-century author Chen Duansheng, and discussed the themes of self-portrait, cross-dressing, and authorial voice in this work. I compared two scenes in which the protagonist looks at her own image in the mirror, before and after she cross-dresses as a man. These textual examples show that in the fictional sphere, cross-dressing empowers the protagonist to pursue a life of autonomy
outside the inner quarters and to explore her life as the equal of men in the social space. Lijun's subversive act challenges the Confucian ideological codes on women's gender roles and inspires women readers to conceive of an unconventional lifestyle. However, the author's appropriation of the cult of virtue and chastity also led to controversies among conservative readers, some of whom strongly disapproved of Lijun's unconventional acts, especially her refusal to revert back to a woman's life at the end. The author's dilemma in concluding the work reflects the incommensurable distance between the author's progressive vision of women's social autonomy and the unsympathetic social climate that constrained women's choices for alternatives outside the inner quarters.

Cross-dressing in Chen's *tanci* surfaces both as a central plot and a cause for narrative dilemma, as the cross-dressed woman inexorably faces the disclosure of her true identity and the pressure of marriage. In a later *tanci* by Qiu Xinru, *Bishenghua* (Blossom from the Brush), the author balances her narrative responsibility and the cross-dressed heroine's moral dilemma by resorting to supernatural elements, such as the fox spirit who synchronizes the heroine's transformation into a male identity, and the motif of female immortals who indicate an imaginative alternative for the traditional *tanci* tale. Despite this usage of the fantastic narrative, Qiu's claimed purpose is didactic, seeking to exempt the heroine Dehua from direct conflict with conventional social and familial relationships. Qiu's arrangement for Dehua to return to the inner chambers indicates a cautious reconceptualization of the domestic sphere as a space of female authority within the orthodox social system. Though Dehua's disguise as a man is exposed, the narrative itself proceeds and constructs a moralistic vision of feminine agency via negotiation with orthodox social systems. This moralistic imperative serves as an ancillary cover for authorial jurisdiction over women's pursuit of freedom and autonomy beyond social norms.

Such inspirational themes of authorial maneuvering and negotiation with moral and ethical principals constitute an important part of chapters 3 and 4, in which I explored the relationships between women's *tanci*, authorial ethics, visual representation, and orthodox discourses about feminine virtue. Author Chen Duansheng's anxiety about women's social space finds resonance in another *tanci* work: *Men-gyingyuan* (Dream, Image, Destiny). This *tanci*, published a century after Chen's *Zaishengyuan*, shows a similar pursuit of a space for self-expression. My analysis of this *tanci* discussed how authorial insertions in the text establish a feminine voice, which invites the readers to establish a sympathetic relationship with the author. In her authorial statements, Zheng reflects on the difficulties of writing and her hardship in finding appreciative audiences. These difficulties further emphasize the social and ideological constraints on women's speech and writing activities during the period, which also resonated in the confessions and grievances of precursory women authors who suffered analogous hardships in writing and publishing their works. I proposed that Zheng's reflection on the ethical issues in writing reveals late imperial women authors' shared anxiety for bringing forth a voice that truly can speak for women writers and readers of the time.
Zheng Danruo's moralizing emphasis on feminine virtue and chastity is an effort to revise the male elite literati's discourses on feminine virtue. Her innovative interpretation of women's virtue might be oriented toward the female reading public of the time, many of whom had been under the influence of the prevailing social discourses about women's ethical duties. These abundant authorial insertions in Zheng's tanci provide evidence that Zheng's work appropriates and revises literati's discourses about feminine virtue to bring forth the author's distinctive voice. This voice expresses the writer's grievances against injustice and appeals to the readers' sympathetic identification with the narrator and the fictional character. The prevalent use of the first-person "I" in these authorial insertions further calls attention to the woman author's presence and self-construction in tanci. Compared with the cross-dressed Lijun, who is reborn with a new social identity by disguising herself as a man, Zheng justifies her literary authorship by appropriating elite discourses of virtue to validate her own purpose in writing. This authorial voice also finds enrichment in a dialogic relationship with the readers of the text, many of whom sympathize with the author about women's difficulty in acquiring social acknowledgement for their literary achievements. Unlike Destiny of Rebirth, Zheng's tanci concludes with the happy reunion of the flower goddesses, reincarnated in the immortal world. This utopian vision, however, is in stark contrast with the author's tragic personal life. Her suicide in the Taiping Rebellion serves to underscore the fact that space for a woman author was not yet obtainable in such a political and social climate.

Chapter 4 investigated the visual space in Mengyingyuan and discussed how literary portraiture in the text invites the reader to sympathize with the women characters and to establish an emotive association with the fictional women in the diegesis. Portraits of women in tanci invite reader sympathy and literally depict alternate possibilities for the self-actualization of women in the late imperial period. This chapter compared the presentation of women in portraiture by literati intellectuals with women's own tradition of making and writing about portraits. Zheng's text enriches traditions of portraiture; she presents the painted woman's power to interact with the viewers and to elicit sympathetic identification from them. In Zheng's text, women characters make portraits to display their resistance to marriage, their filial devotion to parents, and the preservation of their virginity. This gendered perspective underlying the portraiture of women draws attention to the fictional characters as empowered subjects who employ paintings to tell stories of filial devotion and chastity. Such a gendered perspective also evokes a sympathetic relationship with the women readers in the inner quarters of the time as well as with readers in the contemporary period. Readers interact and sympathize with the fictional women and are invited to explore their own places in the story's diegesis. Zheng's transformation of the portrait conventions makes an important contribution to the tradition of tanci and late imperial literature, drawing attention to the intense moral implications of women's painted images and their potential power to question and reconfigure dominant social discourses about womanhood.
The last two chapters study the tropes of itinerant women in modern tanci novels. I expanded the scope of study on women's tanci fiction into the early twentieth century, and offered enquiry on two long tanci works that inherit and resuscinate the narrative tradition of late imperial tanci in a modern historical context. First, chapter 5 revisited the tradition of women's cross-dressing in a 1905 text, Xianü qunying shi (A History of Women Warriors). Echoing previous discussions of the progressive potential of women cross-dressers, I considered multiple examples of cross-dressed women in this text, comparing its presentation of cross-dressing with precursor narratives about women disguised as men in tanci and other late imperial literature. In contrast with the cross-dressed heroines in the previous tanci works, most of the women cross-dressers in this later tanci do not revert back to their feminine identity, but continue to conduct their lives as men's social equals. These women's actions show the authors' reconfigurations of the Confucian ethical discourses about women's virtue and chastity. In the text, cross-dressers are depicted as heroic scholars and warriors who support the good, punish the evil, and rescue the country at times of national crisis. 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. Such a reconception of the gender hierarchy suggests that cross-dressed women of the time might have enjoyed more social tolerance to exercise their social and political power. The text also carries rich examples of homoerotic sensitivities between cross-dressers and other women, who may or may not be aware of the cross-dressers' real sexuality. The women's same-sex desire as depicted in this text resonates with similar scenes in previous tanci. In all, cross-dressing and women's homoeroticism as protofeminist traits in late imperial women's writings critically reflect on their emancipating potentials (on late Qing women's same-sex love, see Xu Ke 38: 114).

The last chapter of the book explored the theme of female citizenship during the interwar period in Shanghai represented in Fengliu zuiren (The Valiant and the Culprit), written by professional female writer Jiang Yingqing. Jiang used the traditional tanci as a narrative vessel to construct new ideals of female citizenship during the interwar period. In her tanci, Jiang took on the relation between women and nation as a pivotal theme to reimagine modern women's social and political agency. Late Qing reformists, nationalists, and Social Darwinist scholars considered women's liberation to be an integral part of China's national reform and rejuvenation. Jiang's tanci invites an important reflection of these elite discourses on women's liberation and social identity and suggests that women's emancipation should be achieved through constructive relationships with one's self, community, and nation. Jiang's heroine Jia Tanhua, who is a social activist and reformer, commits herself to educating fellow women and promoting the rights of lower-class women. Like the feminist revolutionist Qiu Jin, who escaped the yokes of family and went to Japan to study, Tanhua travels to the United States to pursue knowledge after turning down the male protagonist's marriage proposal. Tanhua's political zeal and nationalistic passion fortify her social and political agency. Also, the author presents women's
agency by constructing a pluralistic vision of women’s gender roles. Her women characters, progressive or traditional, collectively illustrate the lives and aspirations of women as culturally embedded subjects in the flux of modern Chinese history.

The authorial introspection and self-reflection embedded within all of these texts are of women who proclaimed their competence to write in the male-dominated literary terrain. These authors’ dilemmas and anxieties about writing are a possible reason for the unfinished quality of many tanci. The unfinished works offer textual margins, that is, conceptual areas which have been exiled from the center, and which invite readers to actively participate in continuing the narrative. In this space of the marginalia resides the nexus of reciprocating interpretation and communicative reproduction. Each tanci author assumes the role of a historian who not only cultivates appreciative readers of her work, but also leads the readers toward self-empowerment by disrupting extant narratives and by inviting them to live tales of their own.

Contextualized reading calls for a critical assessment of the oral traditions that nurtured the development of tanci in its beginning stage and of the literary writings by late imperial women authors which reflect women’s shared hardship in partaking in literary activities. Also, contextualized study of tanci includes an overall review of the relation between tanci and the canonical literatures by male literati writers. The dialogue between tanci and these multifarious literary traditions and cultures contributes to a situated understanding of the literary status of this unique genre. A situated reading of tanci encompasses a social and historical study of women’s gender roles in the patriarchal Confucian society. Social and ideological discourses about women’s virtue and chastity constrained women’s intellectual pursuits and restricted them to the domestic space. Such social and historical background lay behind women authors’ anxiety to search for a space of self-expression through literary endeavors. Reading late imperial protofeminist stories in a contemporary context, specifically, requires a critical assessment of one’s own critical language in writing and presenting these women authors and texts. The meanings of these pre-twentieth-century and early modern works are contingent upon specific social and cultural landscapes as well as the historical negotiation and inscription by women of their social presence. The contents of these texts express universal concerns of women regarding agency, autonomy, freedom, and self-expression, which are themes of enduring importance in feminist studies of contemporary materials in a range of cultural contexts.

Currently tanci works are extant in hand-copied editions, letterpress editions, engraved wood block editions, lead print editions, and lithographical editions. The theme of visuality in tanci texts demands exploration, especially by comparing and analyzing the different editions of illustrated tanci works in relation to the development of the printing technology of the late imperial period since the Ming dynasty. Classic tanci works such as Destiny of Rebirth; Dream, Image, Destiny; and Blossom from the Brush were usually published with woodblock illustrations depicting important scenes from the texts. These illustrations, inserted at the beginning of each chapter, provide evidence for the interconnectedness of tanci narratives and the Ming-Qing publishing enterprise, and the complex mechanism of readerly reception.
as affected by the correlations among literary texts, art, and print culture of the time. The nineteenth century also saw the advance of new printing technology (the mechanized lithographic press) in China, especially in Shanghai. This new technology led to more modern printing of tanci works in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A diachronic study of the various editions of the same tanci work could lead to valuable discoveries about the circulation of tanci among audiences across various historical periods.

Two other topics regarding tanci could be of import. One is the relation between protofeminist tanci stories and women's presses in early twentieth-century China. These progressive tanci works evolved from traditional tanci writings under the influence of modernization and the introduction of Western literature in translation. Tanci writers in the early twentieth century resorted to this traditional genre to advocate for women's enlightenment and education. Many such stories were published or cited in women's journals and magazines and thus were circulated to a wide audience. Several of these stories also reflect an aspiration toward an idealized womanhood inspired by women heroes in Europe and America and suggest a desire to achieve a spiritual solidarity with Western women peers. A study of these tanci stories may enrich the current study in Chinese women's social mobility and their desire for social change at a period of historical transition. Another meaningful research topic is related to the use of technology in disseminating traditional literary texts. In the late 1920s, with the introduction of the radio industry in the southern areas of China, especially in the cities of Shanghai, Suzhou, and Hangzhou, many tanci were adapted for radio programs and gained wide popularity among local audiences. These broadcasted tanci stories and introductory songs, thanks to the popularization of electronic media, consolidated their traditional readership and gained access to audiences in a wide range of social classes and geographical locations. The use of technology in the dissemination of tanci elicits questions about the expanded roles of the audience, who would not only be listeners or readers of the text, but also be inspired to sing and perform these narratives after hearing them on the radio. The expansion of the audience's roles would demand an enriched critical understanding of the literary, social, and cultural values of tanci narratives as they continuously evolve through shifting societal contexts. This ongoing evolution of tanci narratives provides an even greater impetus for critical evaluation of them as protofeminist works that broaden and deepen contemporary feminism's calls for greater empowerment of women in the global context.