Chapter Two

AMONG WOMEN: FEMININE HOMOEROTICISM IN LI GUICYU’S LIUHUAMENG (DREAM OF THE POMEGRANATE FLOWERS)

In her examination of early modern lesbian literature, Susan S. Lanser points out that “the sapphic became an even more explicit vehicle for considering the ‘bedfellowes,’ both literal and figural, that might shape the state. Female homoeroticism could accomplish this cultural project . . . because in unmooring the sign ‘woman’ from the sign ‘man,’ the sapphic evades the most basic of all hierarchies that thus poses an epistemic challenge to hierarchy itself” (Lanser, “Bedfellowes in Royaltie” 103). This chapter studies female homoeroticism in the nineteenth-century tanci Liuhuameng (Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers, below Pomegranate Flowers) by Li Guiyu. Earlier prosimetric novels Jade Bracelets and Destiny of Rebirth each feature the multivalent identity of a heroine disguised as a man, and stage homoerotic sensibilities between the cross-dresser and unsuspecting women who mistake the heroine for a man. Pomegranate Flowers transforms this convention by portraying heroines who are aware of each other’s identity, and yet are engaged in homoerotic interactions,
focusing on the love between two heroines who disguise themselves as men and address each other as “brothers.” Male friendship is evoked as a transformed form of sisterhood and reconfigures women’s same-sex love through discourses of male chivalric friendship. In traditional tanci, women’s same-sex bonds through female alliance or mock unions are akin to kinship and conjugal love, and are deemed as pre-marital social bonds that are supporting rather than subverting family and marriage. In this story women’s friendship, mobilized by a storyline of “male” chivalry, presents compelling queer erotics and renders such same-sex dynamics in disguised and socially more acceptable forms. In comparison with late imperial literati depictions of women’s same-sex love through a male voyeuristic perspective, women’s tanci narratives stage feminine homoerotic pleasure at the focal point, and by reclaiming the visual agency of women, make reading of tanci an empowering experience for readers in the inner chambers.

Feminine homoeroticism, a productive concept, allows readers access to early modern women’s emotional world, in the following aspects: (1) the dialectics between spiritual love and sexual desire; (2) the triangulated desire between women themselves and their husbands; (3) in the case of multiple women who disguise themselves as men and address each other as brothers, the reconfiguration of “brotherhood” as a vehicle for women’s homosocial love. Women’s homoeroticism richly contributes to the early modern discourses of qing (love) and se (lust), by activating a dialogical imagination between the two and redefining both as women-oriented notions that at once transcend and reinforce the heteroerotic norm. By justifying chastity, filial piety, and polygamy, female same-sex desires are endorsed and gain equivalent status as normative sentiments. Whereas women’s homoeroticism could have emerged from or existed in the heterosexual structures, this interstitiality projects an aesthetics of the in-between that is infused by negotiations between the private and the public, and displays women’s hidden mobility to occupy and transform the normative institution of the polygamous marriage through strategic reconfiguration, deviation, or even provisional resistance. Tales of cross-dressed heroines in women’s written tanci project the imaginary of early modern women being freed from one’s family and joining one of higher social standing. Rivalry between women’s homoerotic bonds and heterosexual (often polygamous) marriage arrangements in tanci problematizes the sexual contract underlying the social contract of the polygamous marriage. Aside from fictional depictions of feminine same-sex desire, authorial comments, women readers, relatives, and friends’ frequent endorsements of female-authored tanci fiction in the prefaces and paratextual materials indicate a feminine homosocial component of the historical readership of tanci fiction, and shed light on the interlinkages between women’s literary endeavors, female friendship, and early modern women’s homosocial community.
ENVISAGING LATE IMPERIAL WOMEN’S HOMOEROTICISM

One of the earliest dynastic records about feminine same-sex relations could be found in *Hanwu gushi* (Precedents of Emperor Wu of the Han). Empress Chen, after losing favor from the emperor, commanded a female shaman to dress as a man and share a bed with her as if they were a real couple. Enraged by this illicit affair, the emperor executed the shaman and removed the empress’s title. Aside from royal women, female same-sex relations also included some from humble backgrounds. Bret Hisch notes that court women of the Han would form couples, who were known as 對食 (dui shi, “paired eating”), a term that “may have connoted cunnilingus” (*Passions of the Cut Sleeve* 174). 漢書 (*Hanshu, Records of the Han*) records the love of two slave women Cao Gong 曹宮 and Dao Fang 道房, depicting their relation as “paired eating” (Ban Gu 97: 79). The Tang courtesan Yu Xuanji composed poems to express lesbian eroticism and commemorate same-sex companionship between women (Cahill, “Material Culture and the Dao” 120; also see Mori Ōgai, “Yu Xuanji”). In the late Ming, the poem “與某夫人書” (“Yu mou furen shu, “A Farewell Letter to A Certain Madame”) by poetess Feng Xiaqing 馮小青 manifested homoerotic sentiments (Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* 92). Likewise, the lyric “洞仙歌” (“Dongxiange,” “Song of the Cave Immortals”) by poet and playwright Wu Zao (吳藻, 1799–1862) manifested female homoerotic desires (Idema and Grant 693).

Similar depictions of female homoerotic love could be found in 梨花夢 (*Lihuameng, The Dream of Pear Blossoms*) by the nineteenth-century playwright He Peizhu 何佩珠. In 明齋小識 (*Mingzhai xiaoshi, Short Notes from a Bright Studio, printed 1811*) by Zhu Huixiang 諸晦香, there is a story “二女同死” (“Ernü tongsi,” “Two Women Committing Suicide”), which described two passionate heroines embracing each other and drowning themselves in the river. Well-researched examples in scholarship include Li Yu’s play 憐香伴 (*Lianxiangban, The Fragrant Companion*), the anonymously authored novel 林蘭香 (*Lin Lanxiang*), and the story “封三娘” (“Feng Sanniang”) in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* by Pu Songling (蒲松齡 1640–1715). Female homoeroticism could be found in 續金瓶梅 (*Xu Jinpingmei, Sequel to the Jinpingmei*), authored by Ding Yaokang (丁耀亢, 1599–1669), and Cao Xueqin’s *Hongloumeng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*). In tanci, Tze-Lan Sang notes a plot of affectionate heroines committing suicide for endorsing sisterhood in 五女緣 (*Wunü yuan, Affinity of Five Heroines*) (Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian* 59; Tan Zhengbi and Tan Xun 64–65). Liu Wenjia studies female same-sex desire in the nineteenth-century tanci *Fengshuangfei* (Phoenixes Flying Together) by Cheng Huiying 程蕙英.

In a large number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tanci works, including *Destiny of Rebirth, Blossoms from the Brush, A Tale of Vacuity, Linked Rings of Jade,* and
Affinity of the Golden Fish, women’s homoeroticism is illustrated through intimate emotional bonds and comical interactions between the disguised heroines and their “wives” in the mock unions. The “wives” are frequently made aware of the protagonists’ secrets of cross-dressing, and for the sake of protecting chastity or pursuing religious practices, are willing to act in the role of loving companions in their “marriages.” In Affinity of the Golden Fish, the couple in the mock union write poetry jointly as husband and wife, exchanging poetry and sharing the same rhymes. Such exchanges of verses epitomize a feature of a companionate marriage, and also carry rich homoerotic implications to the readers who know the heroines’ true identities. Women’s homoeroticism in mock unions could even be a rival of heterosexual love. By postponing and even substituting marriage, women’s mock unions make it possible for true companionship for the adventurous heroines and protect their chastity when forced into hapless marriage arrangements. In Pomegranate Flowers, feminine homoeroticism is facilitated through brotherhood. The intimate relationship of the two cross-dressers triggers their fiancé Binyu’s jealousy, and evokes rumors among Hengkui’s uninformed subordinate generals and soldiers that the two are committed to male homosexual love. Here women’s homoeroticism undergoes an unconventional masquerade through male homosexual love.

Pomegranate Flowers reconfigured homoerotic love by depicting the qing/emotional bonds between female characters disguised as men. Li Guiyu composed the first 357 juan of Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers before 1841. The remaining three juan of the novel were composed in 1939 by Huanmei nüshi 浣梅女士, the joint artistic name of two later female authors Weng Qiqian 翁起前 and her relative Yang Meijun 楊美君. According to a preface to Li’s tanci by Peixiang nüshi 佩香女士, Chen Chousong 陳儔松 dated 1841, Li Guiyu, whose artistic name is Hengxian, was born in Gansu, and after marriage, relocated to south Hunan province. Bao Zhenpei proposes that Li’s father probably was on an official post in Gansu, where Li was born (Bao, Manuscripts of Treatise 272). While composing Pomegranate Flowers, Li moved to Fuzhou in Fujian province, and according to some critics, in the later years of her life, Li earned a living by teaching at a school of a local Li family (Wei 24–25; Xue Can 6). Li’s tanci is the longest tanci novel up to date, consisting of 360 juan, and total 4.83 million words. The work was not published in late Qing and had only been circulated through hand-copied versions. It was observed that well before its completion, the novel was circulated and hand-copied by local gentry women in Fujian province. However, many hand-copied versions were incomplete due to the voluminous length of the novel. Only three complete hand-copied versions were discovered. As a custom of Fujian during the Qing goes, local women took to hand-copying books before marriage and brought these books as part of their dowries to the husbands’ families. The current study is based the 1998 edition of Pomegranate Flowers published by Zhongguo wenxian chuban gongsi. As Chen Chousong describes Li the author,
(She is) genteel and benevolent in nature, and is deeply engaged in literature and classics. She is particularly fond of writing. Whenever she has time after caring for the elders, she would amass complete historical writings. Her hands would not stop turning the pages. Her remarks and observations never fail to impart wisdom and talent. . . . When she comments on the rise and fall of the past dynasties, she would lament on the history of the Tang in particular. For after the reign of Zhenguan, the nation began to suffer from disorder in law and administration. . . . When reading histories as such, how could one refrain from closing the pages and let out recurrent sighs? Hence she authored *Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers* for others to read. (Chen Chousong 9)

The story, situated during the reign of Emperor Daizong of the Tang (726–779), goes as follows. The protagonist Gui Bifang is born to a minister’s family and has exceptional martial art skills. When the house of the Gui is haunted by a vicious ghost, Bifang ventures to exorcise the ghost with her sword, but finds out that the ghost is only a heavenly agent sent to deliver a magical military book written in taddle scripts that only she could decipher, for she was predestined to become a general and later a regional prince. Zhang Tingbao, the son of a vicious minister, falls in love with Bifang and wants to take her as a wife. Tingbao is rejected, because Bifang is betrothed to the talented and handsome Heng Binyu, the son of a minister. The Zhang family is enraged by the rejection of the proposal, and summons bandits to ambush Bifang’s family when they are traveling by boat to the capital. Bifang commits suicide by drowning herself in the river. She is rescued by a fairy and sent to the house of female martial artist Long Yayu who leads a brigand of soldiers. The two become sworn sisters. Following Yayu’s suggestion, Bifang disguises herself as a man named Gui Hengkui. Meanwhile, Mei Meixian, daughter of a high official, has participated in the imperial women’s exam presided over by the empress; she wins the First Female Scholar award and is appointed as a *xundao* (instructor) in the palace. At this time, Bifang is considered to have died of suicide. Hence Meixian is betrothed to the “widowed” Heng Binyu. Zhang Fang, the eldest son of the empress’s brother, fails to take Meixian as his concubine. In revenge, he proposes to marry Meixian to the prince of the Eastern Liao in exchange for a peace pact. Meixian is forced to agree, and on her excursion to the frontier, she manages to escape by jumping off a cliff. Once again a fairy rescues Meixian and sends her to the cross-dressed Hengkui. With the assistance of Hengkui, Meixian cross-dresses as a man named Gui Hengchao. The two are now sworn brothers, with Hengkui as the elder one. A significant part of the story depicts the “brotherhood” and love of these two, and their deliberations about obtaining eminent political careers or returning to marriage as women. Both attend the civil service exam. Hengkui becomes the First Scholar through the literature exam. Hengchao becomes the Martial First Scholar. Together they are appointed top generals and are sent to the frontier to battle against the invading Liao.
The brotherhood between Hengkui and Hengchao serves dissimilar purposes for the disguised heroines. Hengchao hopes to seek revenge against Minister Zhang and the invading Liao, and invites Hengkui to join “him” as a military general. For Hengkui, enacting “brotherhood” transforms women’s friendship as a homosocial bond (21:412). When Hengkui takes Hengchao to see her parents and privately confesses to them their secrets of cross-dressing, Hengkui insists that a fairy entrusts “him” to protect Hengchao and cannot revert to the life of a woman. Rather, the two should “seek fame and fortune together, so that they would get revenge for the calamities afflicted upon them” (21:413). The relationship between Hengchao and Hengkui as brothers provides an excuse for them to postpone their marriage to Heng Binyu. When Binyu learns from Meixian’s mother that Hengchao is none other than his betrothed Mei Meixian, he presses Hengchao to return to her feminine attire and marry him. Hengkui, however, declines the proposal by insisting that “he” has yet to repay the grace and care of “his” sworn brother Hengkui for rescuing “him” from death. Unwilling to change her identity, Hengchao insists on addressing Binyu as “elder brother” and refers to herself as “your younger brother.” Although both Hengkui and Hengchao were engaged to Binyu, the marriage arrangements between them are replaced by male kinship, allowing the heroines temporary freedom to enact masculine social and familial roles.

In the second half of the story, the disguised Gui Hengkui is honored as a sovereign of the South Chu kingdom. Her ardent sworn sister Meixian, who now returns to femininity and marries Binyu, is worried about losing her beloved Hengkui when she leaves the capital city to the south. She schemes with the empress and forces Hengkui to confess the truth her femininity, hoping that Hengkui would marry Binyu and thus eternally live with her in a polygamous family. The emperor exempts Hengkui’s deception after knowing that she is a woman, and ordains that she marry Binyu and that the couple shall reign the kingdom of South Chu together. The story continues to depict dozens of outstanding heroines who, selected through civil and martial exams, take charge of the administering and governance the state affairs of the prospering Chu, thwarting the invidious Tang Emperor’s repetitive attempts to subside and even eradicate the Chu regime. Against this backdrop of war and rebellion, conspiracy and outmaneuvering, the plot continues to develop feminine homoerotic bonds between the younger generation of heroines. Mirroring the leading heroine Gui Hengkui, the text depicts Meixian’s daughter Qihui 琦徽 who, in resistance against a forced marriage to a flirtatious cousin Luo Chuanbi 羅傳璧, cross-dresses as a man under the name of Luo Yufeng 羅毓峰 and lives a life under disguise. Later Yufeng, thanks to her valiant achievements on the battlefield, becomes an eminent general, and even takes in four wives. Yufeng, feigning that she needs to observe celibacy for a deceased fiancé for three years, conceals her true identity from her unaware “wives,” and yet often finds her fine companions jealous of each other in rivalry for the “husband’s” affection. Intriguingly,
the plot displaces a male polygamous marriage with one that consists only of women performing the roles of the husband and the wives, and generates intensely comical gender dynamics in their emotional exchanges. This all-female polygamous marriage, in which the man is absent, profoundly rewrites the aforementioned triangular love relationship among the male husband, the female cross-dresser, and her same-sex companion. The text recreates several loving duos of female characters, like the prominent heroines Hengyu and Hengkui. The disguised Luo Yufeng, for example, is infatuated with “his” wife, the beautiful Pan Mingxian潘茗仙.

**EXPANDING QING THROUGH FEMALE HOMOEROTICISM**

Homoerotic sentiments in male-male relationships, as Wu Cuncun insightfully states, were present in the practices of “contract brothers” in the late Ming period. Some of the “brothers” would maintain their relationships beyond the age of thirty when they reverted to conventional marriages and took brides. Wu traced the literary depictions of such “brothers” in the Ming anthology of jokes笑林廣記 (Xiaolin guangji, Extensive Gleanings from the Forests of Laughter) and Li Yu’s famous short story男孟母教合三遷 (Nan Mengmu jiaohe sanqian, A Male Mencius’s Mother Educates His Son and Moves House Three Times). Wu points out that an episode in Jinpingmei illustrates an effeminate young man who is identified by a group of workmen as a catamite, suggesting the homoerotic connotation of “兄弟” (xiongdi, brotherhood) existed in the Ming. In Pomegranate Flowers, the enactment of “brotherhood” between Hengkui and Hengchao reconfigures this convention to a form of female homoeroticism in disguise. The two share the same bed every night when at the frontier, and are depicted as infatuated with each other. When Heng Binyu presses Hengchao into telling him the secret of Hengkui’s true identity as the missing Gui Bifang, Binyu resorts to a range of attempts to make Hengkui compromise and marry him. The emotional bond between Hengkui and Hengchao is, however, unshakable and evokes Binyu’s strong jealousy. Likewise when Binyu seeks to detain Hengchao for wine and entertainment, Hengkui becomes flustered in anger and undisguised envy. The brotherhood of the three is ridden with a dramatic rivalry between heterosexual love and feminine homoeroticism. A passage below, written in rhymed seven-character lines, stages homoerotic gazes of Hengkui toward Hengchao:

Hengkui saw her “brother” in a sound sleep, tipsy eyes, rosy complexion, and a face even more fair. Reclining on her side in brocade quilts, deeply amorous eyes even surpassing those of fairies. A merry Hengkui exited the bed-curtain and put down
the red candle, unwrapping her robe, releasing her belt, she let down the golden curtain hook. Extending the silk quilt, pulling over the beloved brother, she rested side by side with her, sharing a mandarin duck pillow. In a lowered voice, she whispered to the brother into her ear, “How do you feel after being drunk?” The Martial Scholar could barely open her drunken eyes, and answered, “my brother, do not call on me. Heart agitated, mind giddy, I could barely hold myself, That fragrant drink surely does much damage.” The First Scholar, hearing this, beamed a smile, calling on Hengchao, but she fell deeply asleep again. Affable and gentle as a piece of jade, moving and pitiable, making one’s adoration endless. Playfully Hengkui stroked Hengchao’s fragrant cheeks, her fair complexion moist with morning dew. “Even a lotus flower emerging from water cannot rival your exquisiteness. Your fiancé Binyu does not yet have a chance to approach your body, he cannot be a contender with me Hengkui in taking the first chance.” Stroking her hands, warm and tender, Hengkui could not help letting out a sigh, her eyebrows deeply locked. “My heart bears an ambition as high as heaven, I pledge to ascend the court and become a lord. Wearing gold belt and python jade, I shall take Twelve Golden Hairpins as concubines. How resentful that heaven did not abide my desire, and made me suffer as a woman. Rouge and powder are not my cravings; even though I take a man’s robe, how could such a life be long-lasting?” (28:543)

Feminine homoerotic gazes in *tanci* novels may take place between women audiences or characters who are attracted by the ravishing beauty of the disguised scholars without knowing their identities. In *Destiny of Rebirth*, the scene in which the royal maidens wait on the drunken minister Li Junyu begins with them feasting on the minister’s extraordinary looks and evolves to a scene of the maids gazing at the disguised heroines’ two tiny bound feet, an evident symbol of femininity beauty. In *Linked Rings of Jade* and *A Tale of Vacuity*, women’s homoeroticism involves characters’ infatuation with the disguised scholar’s beauty. In these examples women’s same-sex desire between characters was channeled through apparently “heterosexual” relationships between the cross-dresser and the women who are enchanted by the “scholar” in the diegesis. Women readers of such *tanci* have access to the emotional realm of this feminine homoeroticism, since they were given preknowledge about the characters’ act of cross-dressing. On the surface, the depictions of the couple as intimate brothers sharing their pillows and a bed evoke an impression of male homoeroticism. Yet to the readers in the inner chambers, such scenes reinforce women’s same-sex intimacy and invite the readers (many of whom were women) to a female homosocial sphere. The following passage in rhymed lines provides an even more compelling depiction of the physical attraction between Hengkui and Hengchao:
“Were I, Hengkui, an exceptional man, I would certainly compete against Heng Lang for Meixian’s love. My fiancée Jiangzhi is famous for beauty, yet her exquisiteness is inferior to that of sister Hengchao. My sister Heng Zhuqing is supremely gorgeous, yet her attitude is reticent and she distances herself from others. Neither of them is like Sister Hengchao, who is gentle, amorous, and adorable. No wonder she stirs up rivalries among foreign suitors, and her beauty charms and even intoxicates Binyu. Heaven has made me a woman; facing such a beauty, how could I fall asleep?” Hengkui laughs at these thoughts, and relaxes her eyebrows. Without a trace, the morning breeze has come from the east. The Martial Scholar has awakened from the wine, and opened her eyes. She asks, “Why didn’t my brother go to sleep?” The smiling Hengkui replies, “This is all because of you, sister. Seeing your gorgeous face, no one could fall into sleep. Like Mount Wu concealed by twelve auspicious clouds, you are enchanting my heart and taking away my soul.” (28:543)

Previously in the story, Meixian has disguised herself as a man with the name Gui Hengchao, using the same surname Gui as Hengkui. In the above passage, the descriptions of these two “brothers” invite a reinterpretation of qing and same-sex love in dynastic China. Dorothy Ko argues that qing, rather than focusing on romantic love between men and women, has much broader implication to a seventeenth-century reader, and could encompass friendship between people of the same sex (Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chambers 111). Martin Huang, in a study of Bian er chai and Lin Lanxiang, argues that the stories emphasize qing as reciprocal appreciation and as loyalty or chastity (Huang, Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China 179). Sophie Volpp, regarding The Anatomy of Passion, argues that the text “casts male love as a deviant variant that helps legitimate hetererotic passion (qing) as a norm” (Volpp 102). The text stages the dialectics between love (qing) and lust (se), with qing defined against se, and illustrates that se could also emerge from qing. Volpp argues that in the late Ming, qing was rendered more akin to love, as an internalized and idealized quality. Se, more akin to lust, is more sensual and sexual.

The above passages from Pomegranate Flowers stage a women-oriented visual pleasure under the disguise of male homoeroticism, for both Hengkui and Hengchao are in male attire at this moment in the story. Their bond as “brothers” under the same surname Gui guarantees the disguised duo the liberty of sharing the same bed every night and acting intimately toward each other. Their manifest affections for each other even evoke rumors of male homosexual love among the soldiers and other generals (38:750). When enraged by this gossip, the exasperated Hengchao claims that “his” with Hengkui is a tie between jinlan xiongdi (golden orchid brothers), rather than any form of clandestine siqing (private love).
The term “jinlan xiongdi” could be read as an ironic double entendre in the story. The allusion to *jinlan* or golden orchid, though more popularly appropriated for description of sworn sisterhood, initially comprises implications of both brotherhood and sisterhood. The allusion appears in a passage in *繫辭傳* (*Xici zhuan*, Commentary on the Appended Judgements) in *Zhou yi* 周易, “But when two people are at one in their inmost hearts, / They shatter even the strength of iron or of bronze. / And when two people understand each other in their inmost hearts, / Their words are sweet and strong, like the fragrance of orchid” (Wilhelm and Baynes 59). Likewise the chapter “賢媛” (“Xianyuan,” “Virtuous and Talented Ladies”) in Liu Yiqing’s *A New Account of the Tales of the World* describes the friendship between literati scholars Shan Tao (山濤, 205–283), Ji Kang (嵇康, 224–263), and Ruan Ji (阮籍, 210–263) as “契若金蘭” (“qiruo jinlan,” having a bond as that of gold and orchid, Liu Yiqing 54). In the above example, Hengchao’s application of this allusion is fitting in endorsing the integrity and purity of the disguised brothers’ friendship, but also carries an implication of the gender fluidity of the term *jinlan* in representing same-sex amity, including the concealed sisterhood of the two heroines.

To comfort Hengchao, Hengkui says, “As a man why should you be so particular about courtesy? Why should we be ashamed to be fond of each other in the army? My heart cherishes you my brother as pearls and jade. I vow to be a life-long companion of yours” (38:750). The text recurrently accentuates the *qing*, or pure love between Hengchao and Hengkui, who would both be willing to sacrifice their lives for each other. At the same time, the narrative does not refrain from illustrations of homoerotic sentiments, and lavishly depicts the female cross-dresser Hengchao’s sensual appeal and even sexual charm, eliciting evident admiration from Hengkui, as well as from the targeted female readers. The text bestows the notion of *se* or sexual appeal with a homoerotic dimension, and empowers women (in the diegesis and readers in the inner chambers) with an imaginary agency in appreciating visual pleasures of female same-sex attraction. This women-oriented visual structure differs from the male-centered voyeuristic pleasure in Ming Qing depictions of female same-sex intimacies by literati authors (Wang Wenxian). For Hengkui, this “disguise” through brotherhood allows her to explore her female same-sex bond with Hengchao and take this homosocial relationship outside the inner chambers. By substituting brotherhood for her agreement with the hero, she replaces their heterosexual love with a male homosocial relationship, effectively postponing her time to revert to her prearranged marriage.

Li’s *tanci* foregrounds the perspective of Hengkui the cross-dressed libertine, and elicits a dialogical imagination of female homoeroticism comprising *qing* and *se*, with both redefined as women-oriented notions beyond the heteroerotic norm. Martin W. Huang argues that in *Xu Jinpingmei*, lesbian affairs (even involving explicit sexual activities) are only ways to compensate for the absence of man: “Whereas lesbian
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$qing$ is celebrated, lesbian $yu$ is categorically denounced” (Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative* 196). Huang argues that the appropriation of $qing$ serves a dual function. First, “the appeal to $qing$ creates a space within which certain deviations from the norm, such as homosexuality, can be tolerated or even celebrated” (198). Also, this tolerance or celebration is “based on the argument that this seemingly deviant behavior, when motivated by genuine $qing$, vindicates the norms, such as chastity, filiality, and polygamy better than the normal behavior can” (199). Same-sex love could become “more normative than the norms if it is motivated by proper $qing$” (199). Huang and Tze-lan Sang apply the term “lesbianism” to describe women’s same-sex sentiments. Wilt Idema and Beata Grant argue that although lesbianism existed in premodern Chinese literature, male and female same-sex relationships are largely “homoerotic” because they were not necessarily exclusive, nor were they considered to be the primary basis for the definition of one’s identity (Idema and Grant 685). This study considers women’s homoeroticism as a more encompassing term for considering female same-sex desires (spiritual and sexual) in the early modern Chinese context. Homoeroticism is an advantageous theoretical concept that allows modern readers access to premodern women’s emotional world, in the following aspects: (1) the dialectics between spiritual love and sexual desire; (2) the triangulated desire between women themselves and their husbands; (3) the reconfiguration of brotherhood or kinship as a vehicle for endorsing women’s homosocial love.

Most late imperial *tanci* fiction emphasizes the spiritual bonds between sworn sisters; the $qing$ between women in these texts rarely involves physical intimacy. A well-known example is the disguised Meng Lijun and her sworn sister Su Yingxue 蘇映雪 who ventures to substitute Lijun in an imposed marriage. Some cross-dressed heroines believe that a true companionate marriage can only be achieved through sisterhood or women’s close friendship in the mock unions (Guo 147). *Pomegranate Flowers* inherits this convention by illustrating female same-sex love as a form of love superior to heterosexual love. In contrast with the unbreakable $qing$ between Hengchao and Hengkui, male protagonists are prone to be consumed by $se$ or lust, that is, sexual desire and external temptations. Hengkui’s fiancé Heng Binyu is obsessed with the thought of taking Hengkui as his bride. A fox spirit, summoned to serve the Liao kingdom on the battlefield, disguises herself as Hengkui and seduces Binyu. Were it not for Hengkui’s intervention, Binyu would have died of sexual indulgence. Another character Luo Jinkui is a liberal and reckless young general who pursues three heroines and takes them all as his wives. By contrast, the text sheds much more light on the love of Hengkui and Hengchao, their sacrifices and mutual support for achieving victories on the battlefield, and in their undertakings in their political careers. The substitution of female same-sex desire through staged scenes of “male” homoerotic love renders the text potentially transgressive. The consummation of the hero’s love for
the disguised heroines is recurrently thwarted; Binyu’s role as the future “husband” for Hengkui and Hengchao is reduced to that of a sibling, relieving the heroines from the pressure of marriage.

A prominent example illustrating qing between the camouflaged “brothers” is as follows. At the frontier, Hengchao once pardoned a rebel Wang Wei. Later Wang gathered his troops and raised a commotion at the northern border, forcing the emperor to dispatch Binyu to the skirmish. Hengchao was stricken by a stabbing sense of guilt for having pardoned Wang and engaged Binyu in prodigious danger. Burdened with remorse and anxieties, Hengchao fell seriously ill and was approaching death (26:520). Facing death, instead of summoning her blood brother, she gave her last words to Hengkui:

Grateful that brother has rescued me on the way to the frontier, grateful that you have cared for me more than a blood sibling. I hoped to accompany you for the rest of my life, and repay your kindness in the future years. Who could expect that heaven would take away my life, and this illness would separate me from you? Elder brother, please take good care of your health; my brother, please do not lament for my sake. In the other world, my heart shall not wish for anything else; every inch of my soul shall pray for my brother’s well-being. (26:521)

Seeing that Hengchao’s life is in fatal danger, Hengkui is truly heartbroken. She ponders Hengchao’s tender character and laments Hengchao’s short-lived life:

We haven’t become a couple like the legendary Nongyu 弄玉 and Xiaoshi 蕭史, how could I bear the thought of your spirit departing for the immortal realm? When my brother you leave, your face and voice shall grow distant from me, leaving me in anguish in the studio. In the moonlight, by the flowers, you would no longer be there. Though I have thousands of misgivings and regrets, to whom shall I confess? On the path to the Nine Springs please do not forget me, take Hengkui with you and let’s travel together. (27:523)

The “brothers” vow that they would wage their lives to save each other from illness or supreme danger. Later Hengkui risks her life three times to protect Hengchao from death. Reciprocally, when Hengkui nearly loses her life on the battlefields, Hengchao attempts suicide to follow “him.” Paola Zamperini argues that in dynastic fiction there are heroines who use suicide as a vehicle to convey to eternity the strength of their passions. Death could be an act of passion or assertion of chastity. The above passage implies Hengkui’s fidelity toward Hengchao as a lifelong companion. In a despairing attempt to save Hengchao’s life, Hengkui cuts off a piece of flesh from her wrist as medicine for Hengchao, as was often practiced between loving couples or by filial
children to save their ill parents. This act cures Hengchao and consolidates their love. When Hengchao recovers, Hengkui teases “him” by suggesting Hengchao marrying “himself.” Thanking Hengchao for his “profuse affections” (duoqing), Hengkui proposes, “How about returning to your feminine attire and marry me instead? I shall offer you golden chambers and jade houses, holding you in my mouth and caring for you in my heart. I shall not lose to Heng Binyu in tenderness, and will endow you with the noble title of a lady of honor” (27:535). Such amorous scenes of homoerotic flirtations are plentiful, creating an intense reading pleasure for the audience. Through the homoerotic tensions, the text reconfigures the gaze of the (women) readers, and activates the circulation of desire in and out of the diegesis.

The rivalry between heterosexual love (i.e., Binyu’s love for Hengchao and Hengkui) and women’s homoeroticism ends with Hengkui’s refeminization and marriage with Binyu. The love between the two “brothers,” however, persists as a most important relationship among the characters. The narrative portrays comical scenes of the jealousy of the two heroines when they feel uncertainties about the other’s fidelity. Earlier, the emperor ordains Hengkui to marry a minister’s daughter Zhang Jiangzhi 張絳枝, to whom “he” confesses the secret of cross-dressing. Jiangzhi expresses understanding for Hengkui. Seeing Hengkui’s attachment to the “wife” Jiangzhi, the younger “brother” Hengchao becomes poignantly jealous and falls quite ill. Hengkui finds out about her illness and is to punish Hengchao’s servants for neglecting their duties. Hengchao retorts, “The minor illness of mine does not have any relation with them, it is truly unreasonable to punish them. Everyone says that my brother pities and loves me, yet when I am sick, would you bother to visit were it not for the urge of my parents?” (26:515). Like the lovesick Hengchao, the elder Hengkui is prone to possessiveness. When Hengchao is detained drinking with a female general Zhuqing and returns to Hengkui late, “he” finds “his” elder brother in smothered anger, “How many cups of wine did Zhuqing offer you? Why would you bother to return without drinking to your heart’s content? Why do you care about the affairs in the army at all, you should have stayed at her place and not returned” (33:651). In contrast with the heterosexual relationships when fictional women become invidious competing for men’s affections, the heroines’ jealousy in this example is caused by desire for each other’s companionship. Such jealousy and squabbles suggest Hengkui and Hengchao are as a couple in an impassioned marriage. Whereas atrocious women often represent abject femininity caused by a rivalry for male love, the jealousy of the two “brothers” springs from a women-oriented love, rendered all the more desirable because of emotional contention.

Tze-lan Sang argues, “late imperial Chinese women’s literary creations of same-sex relations cross-gender adventures were constrained by their understanding of the male-female hierarchy and the necessity not to cause a permanent breach of gender norms” (Sang 63). In Pomegranate Flowers, the younger brother Hengchao undergoes
refeminization and is married to her fiancé Binyu. The elder Hengkui, determined to never change back to feminine attire, pleads with the new emperor to allow her to guard a province in southeast China and is promoted to become a regional prince. Unwilling to separate from Hengkui, the disheartened Hengchao schemes with Binyu and steals Hengkui’s 鐵券丹書 (tiequan danshu, iron writ of immunity and cinnabar scripts) to prevent “him” from leaving, and discloses Hengkui’s secret of cross-dressing to the emperor. As a consequence, Hengkui is forced into revealing herself as the missing Gui Bifang, and is married to Binyu in a polygamous marriage. Hengchao’s “betrayal” of Hengkui’s secret is motivated by a desire to maintain their unusual romance through a polygamous marriage. Reminiscent of Li Yu’s play Lianxiangban, two women in love with each other “can stay together all their lives by serving the same man,” with female same-sex desire as a “lubricant for the operation of a male-headed, polygamous family” (Sang, The Emerging Lesbian 49). Similar plot could be found in the story “Lianxiang” in Pu Songling’s Strange Tales of a Chinese Studio, in which a fox lady and a female ghost vie against each other for a scholar’s love, yet find each other pitiable and attractive. Eventually both the ghost and the fox spirit are reincarnated as human beings and join the scholar in a polygamous marriage.

Susan S. Lanser insightfully notes in her study of early modern writings on female same-sex relations that these works by male or female authors undertake two ways of imagining the social order. A dominant trend of writings took to what Lanser calls “metamorphic practices that flirt with homonormativity by introducing the possibility of female erotic intimacy but that ultimately reinstate a sex-differentiated and hierarchical status quo” (Lanser, “Bedfellowes in Royaltie” 95). A less common representational strand deploys what Lanser calls “horizontal or leveling practices that emphasize a logic of sameness, promoting the viability or even the superiority of female same-sex bonds” (95). Further, the more conventional metamorphic representations may also bear “a resistant homonormative residue,” which challenges “their own attempts to restore a patriarchal order” (95). Lanser’s discussion of these trends of representing sapphic companions in early modern English literature strikes a resonant tone in the current discussion of early modern literary depictions of female same-sex desire. Representations of female same-sex love or women’s friendship often reinforces the heteronormative relations. Chen Peng observes that the narrative convention of 雙美一夫 (shuangmei yifu, two beauties serving one husband), as showcased in 琵琶記 (Pipa ji, The Story of the Lute) and 兒女英雄傳 (Ernü yingxiongzhuàn, The Story of Sons and Daughters as Heroes), is a discursive construct that, rather than illustrating women as autonomous subjects, reinforces literati scholars’ own subjectivities through an imagined affective utopia based on heteronormative relations.

Hu Siao-chen incisively notes that Li’s tanci carries stronger homoerotic implications among women (Hu, “War, Violence, and the Metaphor of Blood” 278–79). The
metaphor of blood in this *tanci*, Hu argues, simulates the metaphor of tears in *Dream of a Red Chamber* (272). Whereas the sentimental Lin Daiyu is predestined to repay the favor of Jia Baoyu by shedding tears until her life ends, Hengchao’s indebtedness to Hengkui for rescuing her life is to be repaid through the return of her blood. The metaphor of blood in *tanci* usually indicates the heroine’s desperate response to an utmost emotional crisis or life-threatening danger. At the end of *Destiny of Rebirth*, Meng Lijun’s true identity is exposed. She is confronted with the emperor’s pressure to become a royal concubine, or to become a wife of Huangfu Shaohua in a polygamous family. Facing the dilemma, she spits blood and falls seriously ill. Here blood represents emotions akin to “grief and righteous anger” and could trigger extreme actions (Bailey 25). In *Pomegranate Flowers*, however, the metaphor of blood is a symbol of feminine homoeroticism as an excessive emotion. When Hengkui is fatally wounded by arrows from a battle and almost loses her life, Hengchao is so grief-stricken that she vomits blood excessively and nearly dies. She laments, “Alas I have only been blessed with my brother’s great benevolence and grace, and yet could not die for his sake under the arrows. Brother, do not travel far on the way to the netherworld, take your Hengchao with you as a companion” (31:603). Hengchao feels that “her heart has been cut open by flying knives, blood gushes out from her mouth like waves without stop” (31:603). The compelling scenes of Hengchao spitting blood or suffering fainting spells occur mostly when her relationship with Hengkui is challenged by separations, illness, or anxieties about a rivaling party. Their love is consolidated when Hengkui takes an oath to always accompany Hengchao. She stabs her left wrist, drips her blood into a bowl, and asks Hengchao to drink as a vow for her faithfulness (68:1344). This plot could be considered as an adaptation of the ritual of blood-oath brotherhood into a testament of the emotional fidelity of a female same-sex couple. Another example is the aforementioned passage in which Hengkui cut off a piece of flesh as medicine for the seriously ill Hengchao, with blood dribbling down all over her own body. In these cases, female homoerotic love is endorsed as a morally elevated *qing*; its function to endorse fidelity endows this “aberrant” sentiment with a status equivalent to the norm.

The elastic form of *tanci* in seven-character rhymed lines effectively accommodates such excessive expressions of *qing* between the brothers through elaborated dialogues and rich psychological depictions. When Hengkui is alarmed by a palace revolt and has to leave Hengchao to rescue the emperor, the “brothers” exchange extensive confessions by answering each other’s melancholic songs, sharing the same ten 套 (*tao*, suites) and ten 声 (*sheng*, tunes) of 七弦琴 (*qixian qin*, seven-string zither). Hengkui initiates the song by chanting out “his” feelings to the younger brother, whereas Hengchao responds in the same suites and tunes. The allusion of playing the zither for an appreciative audience, an indicator of male friendship or even a strong male homosocial bond, is appropriated as a token of the “brothers”’ private yearnings for each other (also see
discussions about zither and male homosocial bond in Blanchard 40). The melody of the zither provides an occasion of emotional exchange; by singing or harmonizing with their beloved, Hengkui and Hengchao identify each other as companions who can accord internally with themselves. This performative scenario evokes a “queering” aural and reading experience to the private ears of the female audience. Ling Hon Lam argues that the media for realizing literature (be it oral performance or silent reading) affect the way qing is interiorized (Lam, “The Matriarch’s Private Ear” 358). Whereas Pomegranate Flowers represents a peak moment in the development of women’s written tanci, the text’s elasticity transforms the circulation of female homoerotic sentiments into an intermedial experience for audiences in the inner chambers.

Qing, as a leading theme of the novel, embodies a plot device mobilizing the heroine Hengkui’s sojourns between life and death, between the secular world and imm mortal realm. The conjugal sexual love between husband and wife turns out to be a rather destructive force of qing for the heroine Hengkui. In the second half of the novel, after marrying her fiancé Heng Binyu, Hengkui commits herself to Daoist practice and declines intimacy with her husband for nine years. Eventually, the infatuated Binyu could no longer hold his craving, and after making his wife drunk, obtains sexual consummation. Binyu’s transgression almost spoils Hengkui’s attainment through practice and deepens her resentment for 情魔 (qingmo, the snare of qing). Begrudging Binyu for his lust and frivolousness, Hengkui ponders, “Indeed the love of a married couple is thin as paper, nor do my loving children have more affection. Even though my sister Meixian has profuse love, it is difficult to reveal my secret practice to her. . . From now on, I shall cut off tens of thousands of threads of qing, and speed up my return to the immortal mountains without delay” (332:6539).

Having now accomplished her worldly quests and determined to end her life, Hengkui feigns a disease and ceases to take food. As she languishes and approaches death, her daughter-in-law Li Yunzhen, who is adept in alchemy, attempts to make a magic pellet 种情湛露丹 (Zhongqing zhanlu dan, “Ingraining qing and heavy dew pellet”), hoping to evoke her mother-in-law’s affection for her beloved and her desire for life. Unwilling to succumb to worldly emotions and divert from her path to immortality, Hengkui secretly dispatches her servingmaiden to destroy the pellet when it is still being made. Knowing this, her affectionate companion Mei Meixian blames Hengkui for 薄情 (boqing, having shallow qing) or 寡情 (guaqing, lacking in qing), and willfully allows herself to pass away in illness (338:6644). To the reincarnated heroine, qing, whether relating to secular desires, conjugal love, or familial bonds, obstructs her pursuit of immortality.

Unlike heterosexual love, which is often associated with male characters’ sexual lust and possessive desire, female same-sex love receives much commendation and admiration in the story, and at times could restore the deceased to life. In comparison with the
cogent and resolute Hengkui, Meixian’s character bespeaks qing as a vital bond with the mortal and earthly realm. As Hengkui reveals to her, as Hengchao’s 情根 (qing-gen, the root of emotions) is not eliminated, her recurrent efforts of taking her own life could not take her to the immortal realm. Hengchao’s qing for Hengkui counters Hengkui’s desire for immortality and delays her planned parting from the ethereal world. At Hengkui’s death bed, Hengchao confesses, “Since we forged the bond you are my only companion. Wish you enjoy a life of thousands of years. Even if you yearn to become a recluse, you must await my death first” (339:6664). When Hengkui indicates the wish to make Meixian the queen as a successor of herself, Hengchao responds, “Every day that my sister lives is akin to a day of bliss for me. Before the day you depart for heaven, you shall consider me a companion on your path of return. Whether myself a ghost or a fairy, I shall obey your command, and will not let go unless I know your whereabouts... If you intend to conceal your time of passing from me, in the netherworld I shall not let go begrudge against you” (339:6665). Shortly after Hengkui’s death, Hengchao first attempts to take her own life by using a sword to slit open her throat, but is rescued. After six months, Hengchao, overridden with grief about losing Hengkui, commits suicide by jumping off a pagoda. Before her death, she composes a letter to the king, explaining her suicide because of her affection (qing) for her sworn sister, and expressing her wish to be buried beside Hengkui’s tomb. Enclosed with the letter is a poem of hers:

Azure sky, forceful gale, agitated wild geese,
Across thousands of years, one’s qing cannot to be dispelled.
Having entrusted my heart to a knowing companion,
I might as well pour out hot blood from the jade pagoda. (350:6882)

The narrator laments Hengchao’s death as the penultimate manifestation of qing, “An unrivaled beauty and one with profuse qing, now a soul that grieves the moon and bids weeping cries of cranes. Burning blood gushing down right, her name is long-standing for her exceptional qing” (350:6883). This homoerotic bond between the amorous duo is also equated to a love between a couple. At Hengchao’s funeral, the narrator takes on the perspective of the grieving sisters of the heroine and illustrates the scene as follows: “Covering the gilded coffin and sealing up the jade vault, ending a long-lasting bond of friendship. Even though the mandarin ducks of wounded wings cannot fly in pairs, the swan geese shall strive to sail in a flock” (351:6892). Irrevocably, at this moment Hengchao and Hengkui, “the enamored sisters become spouses.” The images of mandarin ducks and swan geese here, normally embodiments of love and chastity between couples, are evoked to commemorate the pledge of affection between the two.
The text’s ramification of feminine homoerotic *qing* through the character of Hengchao could be understood in the following aspects. First, the trope of making the characters’ *qing* as a driving force for Hengchao and Hengkui’s recurrent sojourns between life and death certainly recalls the eminent playwright Tang Xianzu’s defense of *qing*, “What gives birth to love (*qing*) is unknown, but love runs so deep. The living can die for love, and the dead can also come back to life because of love. That which the living cannot die for and for which the dead cannot be resurrected is not supreme love” (Tang Xianzu, “Preface to Peony Pavilion”; Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative* 44). As Martin W. Huang observes, Tang’s strategic association of *qing* to the concept of *sheng-sheng* (perpetual renewal of life) from 易經 (*Yijing, Book of Changes*) authenticates *qing* ontologically (44). *Qing* is “a power that transcends the boundaries of life and death” and “merits celebration as much as life itself” (44). Besides, “*qing* is conceived in opposition to *li* (reason or principle; the metaphysical moral concept in Neo-Confucianism)” (44).

In *Pomegranate Flowers*, the devoted Hengchao embodies the enigmatic power of *qing* that transcends moral and ethical norms; the heroine’s excessive passion is such that her beloved Hengkui has to hide her design of leaving for immortality. Hengchao’s repetitive efforts to take her own life and eventual suicide renders this character the ultimate spectacle of hyperbolic *qing*. Before Hengkui passes away, she attempts to persuade Hengchao to succeed her role as a queen in reigning the palace and give parental instructions to the royal descendants. However, Hengchao’s suicide shortly after Hengkui’s death indicates her refusal to give up *qing* for the sake of *li*, that is, reason or the moral principle of conduct. Second, the text’s strong accentuation of two female cross-dressers’ homoerotic *qing* distinguishes itself from other traditional *tanci* that depicts the disguised heroine’s firm rejection of heterosexual *qing* (as Meng Lijun in her relationship with the lovesick Huangfu Shaohua), or offers an expansion of *qing* to include men’s feelings aside from a couple’s conjugal love, such as sympathy and filial passions in Zheng Danruo’s *Dream, Image, Destiny*. Feminine homoerotic love in *tanci* fiction is traditionally depicted as an ironized and thus often comical admiration, usually involving the amorous party’s misunderstandings of the cross-dressers’ true identities. Such scenes may occur between a disguised heroine and her unsuspicious spouse in a mock union, or between a female cross-dresser and other unknowing heroines who are enchanted by the beauty of the effeminate “scholar.” These illustrations deftly embed homoerotic nuances in moments of amusing misunderstandings, and do not pose challenges to the heteronormative gender roles. The same-sex love in *Pomegranate Flowers*, in comparison, offers a rather open, explicit, and dedicated depiction of feminine homoerotic sentiment beyond norms. These textual features indicate a much more resolute and self-affirming authorial stance in depicting women’s same-sex companionship to a late nineteenth-century audience who were possibly more open and more accepting of fictional same-sex relations.
Homoerotic *qing* in women’s “golden orchid” bond underlies the social and emotional interconnections between Hengkui, Hengchao, and Hengkui’s many sworn sisters. As she says before her death, “Resting on the pillow I recall my sister, what a weighty pledge we must have made on the Three-Life Stone! In reflection, in this dust world, I have forged bonds with many other than Hengchao! Xiangyu, Qinxian and Yayu, have all committed themselves to our golden orchid oath. Who doesn’t have profuse *qing* and camaraderie? Who has not been entrenched in love and caresses!” (338:6641). Yet knowing Hengchao as one with exceptional benevolence and emotional commitment for her, Hengkui worries about risk of life for her companion, “living my treasured sister in the world, is as vexing as putting a thread through a needle, and is truly difficult to do” (338:6641). Here, the Buddhist allusion to 三生石 (sansheng shi, the Three-Life Stone) refers to the stone of three lifetimes, birth, death, and rebirth (Widmer, “Reviewed Work” 205). Yuan Jiao’s *Ganze yao* elucidates the reference of “Three-Life Stone” as a symbol of the friendship between a Tang dynasty scholar Li Yuan and a Buddhist monk Yuan Guan Yuan Guan.

A prominent example is the literary heroine Lin Daiyu, who is the reincarnation of the goddess of Crimson Pearl by the banks of the Western spirit river, beside the Three-Life Stone. The Three-Life Stone is therefore related to the illusory site where *qing* is generated. Although the allusion was evoked often to as a bedrock for literary depictions heterosexual love, “Three-Life Stone” originally embodied an ideal of uniting with one’s destined companion through reincarnation, because of the two’s predestined bond, or 性靈相投 (*xingling xiangtou*, two people’s nature and soul as one) (Zhang Manling 46). Hence in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the relation between Baoyu and Daiyu is not based on heterosexual love, but rather evolves from the rhetoric of “xingling xiangtou” embedded in the above. The allusion itself does not exclude a space for including homoerotic *qing* as one of the relations between the two predestined companions (46). The allusion is reconfigured to specifically denote homoerotic *qing* between women in *Pomegranate Flowers*. Even though Hengkui has thought of waiting for the end of Hengchao to take her to the immortal realm together, she could not bear the slight and advance from her husband Binyu. Irrevocably, marriage established on heteronormative relations obstructs feminine homoerotic *qing*, rather than allowing a space for it. Unlike Hengchao, who would gladly accept “two wives serving a husband” as a precondition for maintaining her intimate bond with her sister, Hengkui’s self-willed and precipitated death indicates a rejection of the traditional option of a polygamous marriage as a veneer for women’s same-sex love. A viable space for homoerotic relations, almost as unattainable as immortality itself, could only be found in an imagined feminine utopia.
TRIANGULATED LOVE RELATIONS

The triangulated love relationship between Hengchao, Hengkui, and Binyu invites a new understanding of the polygamous marriage system, and its relationship with feminine love and desire. Frequently, late imperial fictional works display the frustration or failure in establishing a harmonious relationship underlying a polygamous family. In *Story of the Stone*, as Martin Huang rightly argues, the triangular relationship between Baochai, Daiyu, and Baoyu always involve the two heroines “managing to interrupt each other’s rendezvous with Baoyu” (Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* 302). Yu Pingbo, however, proposes Baochai and Daiyu are initially represented through the trope of *chaidai heyi* as duo characters, who were introduced simultaneously and evoked as if “they were two opposing hills and two rivers flowing from the same origin, each presenting their delicateness without surpassing the other” (Yu Pingbo 112). The textual references to moments of sisterhood and female intimacy between Baochai and Daiyu also draw attention to potential implications of female homosociality. Some went further to suggest a homoerotic tension between Daiyu and Baochai. Also the triangular love between the three protagonists has been projected onto the love relationships in the three female opera singers Ouguan, Ruiguan, and Fangguan. These three opera singers were assigned to serve Daiyu, Baozhai, and Baoyu, creating an implication of character equivalence between them and the main characters they follow. In this light, *The Story of the Stone* projects a feminine homoerotic dimension of interpretation by recasting the protagonists’ love through the three minor feminine characters. This new approach to the triangulated love in the novel allows a recontextualization of fictional depictions of female same-sex intimacy foreshadowing representations of such themes in women’s *tanci* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Dynastic depictions the triangulated love relationship between a husband and his wife and concubines comprise scenes of jealousy and rivalry among the women for the husband’s love. Keith McMahon argues that in dynastic China, the institutionalization of polygamy “projects an illusion that the multiple women would serve one man happily, as if that one man could unite and satisfy them all. In support of that illusion, polygamy invented the ideal wife, the woman who introduced other women to her husband and even loved the concubines as much as the husband did” (McMahon, “The Institution of Polygamy” 932). Whereas this main and domineering wife managed the marital relations of the polygamous family, McMahon rightly points out that rather than eliminating feminine jealousy, this illusion of the ideal wife represents a “good, constructive” jealous that regulates the man’s sexual life and prevents him from sexual indulgence and profligacy (932). The institution of polygamy, according to McMahon, operates on four principles: (1) “the strict distinction between main wife
and the concubines,” (2) “women must not be jealous,” (3) “prohibition against passionate intimacy,” (4) “polygamy could only survive if it observed order, hierarchy, and distribution of effort” (920–22).

McMahon’s work sheds light on how feminine jealousy, rivalry, and conflict with the polygamous institution are reconfigured in women-authored tanci fiction. The cross-dressed and then refeminized Gui Hengkui plays the role of the main wife who rescues Binyu when he falls victim to the infatuating and scheming fox spirit and nearly lost his life. Later in the story, Gui Hengkui discovers that a concubine of Binyu’s Liu Xiangqing 柳湘卿 was wrongly accused by Binyu of seducing him before marriage. It was actually a maid of Liu’s who disguises as her mistress to seduce Binyu. Hengkui discovers the truth, and takes pains to persuade Binyu into trusting Liu’s chastity. She goes so far as to arrange the servants to act as haunting ghosts in front of the lying maid, thus making her confess the truth and redeem the innocence of her mistress. These plot arrangements display the refeminized Hengkui taking on the role of the main wife in regulating domestic relations, endorsing chastity and virtue, and maintaining the decorum and the hierarchy underlying the polygamous family system.

The idealized wife’s “jealousy” in a polygamous marriage is very much rewritten. The husband Binyu, like many fictional heroes, displays favoritism toward the bashful and beautiful Meixian (i.e., Hengchao). This favoritism of one concubine is usually considered as threatening to the balance of the polygamous family structure, and should be restrained by the main wife under normal circumstances. However, Hengkui, who painstakingly avoids sexual intimacy with her husband, finds this situation relieving and even encourages Binyu to spend nights with Meixian more often. Feminine jealousy for a male protagonist’s love becomes largely absent except in the case of the misbehaving maid, whose jealousy for the master’s love is represented through a much-ironized tone. Meanwhile, the gentry heroines in the book are preoccupied with another form of rivalry: the competition for the main heroine Hengkui’s affection. The following passage, for example, depicts several female characters who have been all become sworn sisters with the heroine Hengkui, vying against each other for Hengkui’s love. At one point Hengkui decides to take a sworn sister Jiang Qinxian 蔣琴仙 on a trip to pay tribute to the ancestors. Her other sworn sisters Qian Caichun 錢彩春, Long Yayu 龍雅玉, and Heng Qiongqing 恆瓊卿 all expressed covetousness: “Since we are all beloved sisters of golden orchids, why do you discard the old and cherish the new, leaving your Meixian behind?” (72:1416). Henkui, unwilling to be blamed for being untrue, retorts that it was all because “the faithless Hengchao went against our former agreement” and went back to femininity.

Biyun, with a smile, says, “Indeed Hengkui is ardent and has sincere emotions. In the general’s bed, how affectionate and loving they are to each other! It looks that
Hengkui you are too partial in your love to Hengchao. Sister Long also has forged an orchid bond with you. Between the old and new, why do you favor one and ignore another?” The amused Hengkui replied to the younger Sister Zou, “How could you blame that I have shifted my love to another person? For my dedication in feelings, you should ask Sister Qian, and why she agreed to forge a sworn sisterhood with me on Mount of Nine Heroes. It is Yayu who is frivolous and uncaring. She is infatuated with her husband, and has reduced her affection for me. Even we two are close, it is not easy to see her in person. Even though I suffer from missing her, what could I do after all?” Yayu, smiling, answers, “My dear sister, please do not bother to visit us and make confessions about your profuse love. Your true love is Cousin Mei. How could you have any sincere feelings for the rest of us?” Zhuqing adds an interjection, “Sister Long, what is the need for being envious? What good is there were she really affectionate to us? We would have been jeered and ridiculed by others everywhere. Our reputation will be damaged; our names will never be cleansed.” Jiang Qinxian, hearing this, could not hold back her beams, “Indeed your words are true! When Hengchao accompanies Hengkui every night at the Spring Greeting Mansion, all kinds of suspicions and rumors were spread. Hengkui is known as the most enamored one. In my view she gives equally great fondness and anguish to others.” (72:1416)

Resonant with the triangulated love relationship between the refeminized Hengkui, Hengchao, and their husband Binyu, the above passage describes Long Yayu, a minor female character, whose marriage evoked envious feelings from her sworn sister Hengkui. The passage illustrates a situation of feminine homosocial affections, facilitated through the “golden orchid bond.” The reconfiguration of the “golden orchid bond” in the text facilitates a kind of female same-sex relationship that endorses the heroine Hengkui’s autonomous subjectivity. Whereas the disguised Hengkui eschews a heteronormative marriage, friendships and sworn sisterhood allowed her to forge a much more egalitarian bond with other heroines. These rather prevalent “golden orchid bonds” between the fictional heroines—like the bonds between Yayu and Hengkui, Hengkui and Heng Qiongqing, and Hengkui and Jiangzhi—emphasize the affectionate heroines’ feminine subjectivity rather than ascribing a masculine to Hengkui or re-affirming her relationship with other women into a heterosexual norm.

Aside from the trio Hengkui, Binyu, and Hengchao, several triangulated relationships in the latter half of the novel continue to illustrate the comical competition between heterosexual love and feminine homoerotics. In such intriguing scenes, the female homoerotic bond is depicted as superior. The heroines engage in such homosocial bonds, whether they are disguised women themselves, or fiancées and brides of the cross-dressers, and are depicted as loyal and chaste characters without exception. Hengkui’s adopted daughter Qihui is Binyu and Hengchao’s eldest daughter.
To flee from an imposed marriage, she disguises herself as a man named Luo Yufeng and establishes herself as a martial general. She becomes a sworn brother with a disguised female general Geng Yaoguang, the third daughter of Binyu and his concubine Qian Caichun. As half-siblings of different mothers, the two cross-dressed heroines often share the same bed when resting, under the veneer of brotherhood. However, their fondness for each other evokes strong jealousy from Yaoguang’s fiancé Gui Shunying, who knows Yaoguang’s identity but does not know that Yufeng is also a woman, and suspects the two are having a secret affair. One night, after Yaoguang becomes drunk at a banquet and returns to rest early, Shunying comes in after her, pretending himself to be Yufeng, and tests Yaoguang’s relationship with Yufeng by attempting sexual intimacy. Luckily the endeavor is detected by Yaoguang, who in great rage exposes Shunying’s rancorous conduct to Yufeng when he returns from the banquet.

This subplot is vital in highlighting the following intriguing aspects of the triangular love relations. First, for the beguiled Shunying, Yufeng is no more than an adopted son of the Heng family. Yufeng’s cross-dressed identity causes the ironic misunderstanding of her homoerotic bond with Yaoguang as an incestuous affair between two close siblings, not unlike that of the notorious Lady Wen Jiang and her half-brother Duke Xiang of the Qi. Second, the humiliated Yaoguang insists on defending her chastity by firmly rejecting Shunying’s sexual advances and then restating her observation of virginal chastity. This textual detail not only foreshadows Yaoguang’s refeminization and marriage with Shunying, but also indicates the asexual nature of Yaoguang’s relationship with the disguised Yufeng, affirming that both heroines do not break moral norms in behavior despite their emotional intimacy with each other. Third, in the text, through the voice of Yufeng, the narrator expresses indignation against the inequality between men’s and women’s gender roles: “The frivolous men are wary and mistrustful, every one of them intent to despise women. Heaven has wronged me and my sister, how could we endure such inhuman maltreatment?” (198:3894). Demonstrably, in this example, the triangulated relationship does not so much illustrate conflicted ideals of marriage and love, but focuses more on deeper prejudice and inequality with regard to the roles of men and women in Confucian gender ideologies.

The contention between heterosexual relations and heroines’ homoerotic bond, centrally reflected in the relationship between Hengkui and Hengchao, is recreated in several relationships among younger generations of heroines in the second half of the story. A daughter of a minister Pan Mingxian is betrothed to Yufeng. The king and queen, unaware of this engagement, arranges for Yufeng to take another girl named Jiang Bingzi as his wife. It happens that Bingzi has already been engaged to Yufeng’s cousin Luo Yuqi. The jealous Yuqi, prompted by this incident, injures Yufeng with a sword. One night on the battlefield, the cross-dressed Yufeng was suffering from
this injury during a routine nightly inspection, and “he” has to stop by Mingxian’s camp. Yuqi, who is secretly in love with the beautiful Pan Mingxian, finds out that Yufeng is visiting her and receives tender care from the gentle girl. Not knowing that Yufeng is also a woman, the enraged Yuqi returns to Mingxian, accuses her of risking her chastity before marriage, and taking advantage of the moment, attempts to force a sexual advance onto Mingxian. The insulted Mingxian flees to Yufeng’s camp and tells her about Yuqi’s misconduct. When the enraged Yufeng storms out to look for Yuqi, Mingxian is exasperated that the two’s unavoidable brawl might make the scandal public and ruin her reputation. In the midst of fury and desperation, she seeks to hang herself, but fortunately is rescued. Eventually, Queen Hengkui has to interfere in person as a mediator, to appease the anger of Yufeng and Mingxian, and to deliver appropriate punishment for the bellicose Yuqi.

This triangular relationship between Yufeng, Mingxian, and Yuqi expresses certain ironizing textual nuances. In the rivalry of the brothers, the cross-dressed Yufeng’s true identity is not exposed to others, including her betrothed fiancée Mingxian. Yufeng’s admiration for Mingxian and intimacy with her could be identified as homoerotic in Yufeng’s point of view, as well as in the eyes of the knowing audience, but appears to others as a gendered yearning that is masculine. Second, multiple mechanisms of feminine cross-dressing are embedded in the plot, complicating the gender dynamics in the story. After her engagement with Yufeng, Mingxian herself undergoes cross-dressing, attends and passes the civil exam, and ultimately becomes a military general. As Mingxian establishes her career, Yufeng does not seek to complete their marriage ceremony in order to keep Mingxian’s cross-dressing a secret. This guileful camouflage allows the “groom” Yufeng herself a convenient extended time to keep her true identity secret, though it ultimately triggers Yuqi’s dramatic burst of envy and jealousy. Third, the love between Hengkui and Hengchao is self-identified and reciprocal same-sex love, whereas Binyu’s jealousy encompasses an envy for each of the duo for being the receiver of another’s passionate affection. In comparison, Yufeng and Mingxian’s relationship is much more heteronormative on the surface, and homoerotic nuances are quite hidden and one-directional. Yufeng’s identity takes on a split position as she plays the role of an insulted fiancé when confronted by Yuqi.

René Girard notes that the dynamics of triangular desire, far from being a fixed concept, is a model or “a whole family of models” that “always allude to the mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations” (Deceit, Desire, and the Novel 2). Sexual differences are “mobile, variable, and inessential, whereas the triangular structure is permanent and essential” (A Theater of Envy 260). In view of the triangular structure, only certain forms of homosexuality can be described from the point of view of a performative dynamics, suggesting the integration with a more essentialist perspective (see Antonello and Webb). Li Guiyu’s novel expresses multiple modes of triangular
structure that all accommodates feminine homoerotic desire within the Confucian regulations of human relationships. These diverse modes of triangulated desire include: (1) a reconfiguration of the polygamous ideal of “two wives serving one husband,” by intensifying the competition between heterosexual love and women’s same-sex desire, as illustrated in the case of Binyu, Hengkui, and Hengchao; (2) a reinterpretation of women’s wide-ranged “orchid bond,” not merely as sisterhood, but as a spectrum of women’s homoerotic bonds, comprising the intersections and rivalry of multiple heroines striving for an emotional bond with Hengkui; (3) an ironized representation of male rivalry for a heroine, displayed in the case of Yufeng and Yuqi’s conflict about Mingxian’s love, by portraying one of the male characters as a disguised woman in a clandestine bond with the pursued heroine; (4) regarding another trio of Yufeng, Yaoguang, and Yufeng’s half-brother Shunying, the tensions among the three foreground the conflict between heterosexual love and familial bond. The homoerotic bond of the cross-dressed Yufeng and her half-sister Yaoguang comes off askew to the covetous Shunying, who, not knowing that Yufeng is a disguised woman, accuses Yufeng of committing incest with Yaoguang.

The curious and unconventional bonds between betrothed lovers, half-siblings, sworn sisters, and marital companions not only bespeak new forms of intersubjective relations that appropriate and transcend Confucian definitions of social and familial hierarchy, but also invite ponderance about the relation between gender dynamics and the novelistic knowledge in *tanci* fiction by women. The cross-dressed female character, as Hengkui exhibits, may acquire a desirability as an androgynous subject and evoke jealous zeal of possession from admiring parties, including both men and women. This passion for the disguised heroine in the story is channeled through two venues, that is, competitive actions to acquire the subject (as Binyu displays), or an equivalently compelling desire to emulate the subject of desire in order to become her. The disguised Hengkui inspires many of her sworn sisters to cross-dress or explore life as war generals or civil officers. Markedly, feminine homoerotic desire falls into this second category of jealous zeal. The desire to become the cross-dresser activates a “positive jealousy” that helps the supporting female characters break the social and familial confines and accomplish exceptional achievements. Feminine homoerotic desire in the above triangular structures is endowed with a progressive potential that propagates the moral purpose of the novel—in other words, women’s self-empowerment and wide-ranging participation in social affairs and governance of state affairs.

Finally, feminine same-sex intimacies in the text do not exclude the heroines from claiming their moral and ethical integrity, but rather serve as a covert rhetoric that reinforces their stance in terms of chastity and womanly virtue. In the story, the envious male rivals including Binyu, Yuqi, and Shunying invariably attempt to make physical advances to the heroines, and are depicted as avid in sexual desire but rather unwieldy
or downright incompetent in achieving emotional connection and understanding with their beloved. The text’s palpable irony indicates that the heroes entranced in heterosexual desire perceive qing as a subjective feeling of love itself, and frequently become obsessed with sexual passion. Intriguingly, such belligerences and advances allow the heroines to prove their insistence of virginal chastity (as in the case of the unmarried Mingxian and Yaoguang), or to make known their determination of religious pursuits (as in the case of Hengkui). Masculine cardinal desire in this regard carry a twofold function in the plot. First, it promotes a moral defense for heroines in same-sex bonds, and assuages the tensions between adventurous characters’ personal actions and the social paradigms that they inevitably operate in, proving that such exceptional sentiments do not seek to break certain cultural boundaries. Second, the text emphasizes the distinction and interplay of qing and se, demonstrating feminine homoerotic love as a form of sublimated, emotionalized desire superior to carnal lust. If plot could be considered as “a dynamics of desire,” as Patricia Meyer Spacks observes in Desire and Truth, the text’s undertaking, in addition to illuminate the exuberance of desire beyond the heteronormative regime, is still to moderate desire, particularly feminine same-sex longing for the moral approval by other characters in the diegesis, as well as the implied readers of the book.

**FEMALE HOMOSOCIALITY AND FEMININE UTOPIA IN CONTEXT**

Feminine homosocial bonds in early modern Chinese contexts, as discussed above, could be engaged in a productive dialogue with a cross-cultural exploration of homosociality. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, “To draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted” (Sedgwick 696). Sedgwick further points out that the “diacritical opposition between the ‘homosocial’ and the ‘homosexual’ seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women . . . than for men. . . . The apparent simplicity—the unity—of the continuum between ‘women loving women’ and ‘women promoting the interests of women,’ extending over the erotic, social, familial, economic, and political realms, would not be so striking if it were not in strong contrast to the arrangement among males” (697). Sedgwick’s discussion invites a reconsideration of the patriarchal familial hierarchy depending on and reinforcing “interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women” (697). Women’s homosocial relations, on the other hand, call attention to the “intelligible continuum of aims, emotions, and valuations” that links “lesbianisms
with other forms of women’s attention to women: the bonds of mother and daughter, for instance, the bond of sister and sister, women’s friendship, ‘networking,’ and the active struggles of feminism” (697). Based on these discussions, Sedgwick proposes that the concept of “homosocial” does not need to be dichotomized as against “homosexual,” but could “intelligibly denominate the entire continuum” (697).

The above discussion is largely based on recontextualizing feminine homosocial bonds in dialogue with male homosexuality studies, and on delineating the relations between homosociality and homosexuality. Dynastic Chinese literature, history, and culture could provide records and narratives of female homosociality that eloquently expand modern and Anglophone theoretical discourses about this subject. To begin with, literary women’s friendship in early modern China could contribute to the current study of feminine homosociality beyond that of female same-sex desire. The expanding literacy of women writers of the late imperial China (from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century), as Paul S. Ropp states, “helped to popularize the ideals of romantic love, and to raise women’s expectations regarding marriage and their active participation in creative cultural activities” (Ropp, “Love, Literacy, and Laments” 107). Literate women experienced the conflict of their own hopes and aspirations with the patriarchal family system. Some chose to respond to these conflicts or raise questions about social constraints on women in general (107). As early as the Wei Jin period, women developed communities to participate in religious activities such as learning the Buddhist scriptures and paying ritualistic tributes. Female religious communities provided spiritual comfort as well as material assistance for participating women. With the rise of Confucian orthodox thoughts in the Song dynasty, such female religious communities gradually vanished. Women were largely confined to domestic activities. By the seventeenth century, Ropp observes, “commercial expansion, the growth of printing, and the rise of an urban entertainment culture, especially in such urbanized areas as the lower Yangtze valley, provided women (both as courtesans and as gentry wives) with increased opportunities for literacy, self-awareness and in some cases, economic independence” (108). Thanks to the rise of the talented women’s culture and a transformed social environment, some learned women were able to develop communities of their own among female relatives and friends. Such earlier forms of women’s community allowed women wider socialization and display of artistic talent through family-based exchanges.

Such supportive networks of women’s authors were often supported by sympathetic male relatives or friends, though the general culture displayed ambivalence or indifference to women’s literary undertakings. Examples of such family-based women’s literary communities include the reputed Ye family, consisting of poet Shen Yixiu (沈宜修, 1590–1635) and her daughters Ye Wanwan (葉紈紈, 1610–1632), Ye Xiaoluan (葉小鸞, 1616–1632), and Ye Xiaowan (葉小紈, 1613–1657). Other notable women’s
family-based networks include the Huanhua Poetry Club (浣花詩社, *Huanhua shishe*) in Sichuan; the Nine Women of Lixiang in Jian’An, Fujian (荔鄉九女, *Lixiang jiunü*); the Ten Ladies of the Dong Family (董十媛, *Dong shiyuan*) in Jiading, Jiangxi; the Six Talented Women of the Zhang Family in Jiangsu, among others. With the expansion of women’s activities through travel and social interactions, formal literary communities of women came into being. An important poetry exchange club is 蕉園詩社 (*Jiaoyuan shishe*, Banana Garden Poetry Club), consisting of poetesses Xu Can (徐燦, 1610–1678), Chai Jingyi (柴靜儀, fl. mid-seventeenth century), Zhu Rouze (朱柔則, 1662–1722), Lin Yining (林以寧, 1655–after 1730), Qian Fenglun (錢鳳綸, 1662–1722), and others. Similar networks include 清溪詩社 (*Qingxi shishe*, Clear Creek Poetry Club) and the female disciplines of the Sui Garden. Gentry women’s literary clubs not only endorsed and extended the mother-daughter legacy in practices of family learning, but also allowed women to develop friendships and social connections beyond the domestic sphere. These networks allowed educated women to compose and exchange poems to celebrate feminine friendship.

As scholars pointed out, in Ming dynasty literature the shared interest in literary and artistic pursuits is often portrayed through male-female relations between literati and courtesans, whereas in Qing writings, such male-female relations were often portrayed through the intellectual and spiritual companionship of husbands and wives. Ropp argues that the growing literacy of women in Qing possibly contributed to the “development of intellectual and emotional intimacy, especially between gentry husbands and wives” (Ropp, “Love, Literacy, and Laments” 109). However, literary friendship and companionship in the abovementioned circumstances are largely depicted as between men and women. Women’s poetry clubs and literary networks of the Ming and Qing allowed some space for female authors to endorse feminine friendship or even articulate intimate feelings and emotions. Some women’s poems expressed passionate emotional dedication to their bosom friends. It should be noted that women’s language still very much conditioned by the conventional discourses of the male-female companionship. In rare cases when female friendship or intimate bonds were described, authors resorted to the formulaic expressions or languages typical in the literary exchanges between literati and courtesans, or between husbands and their companionate wives, creating textual ambivalences about voice and gendered subjectivity. Textual ambivalence creates a space for feminine homosocial readership, by allowing women to articulate female friendship through the language of the male-female emotional expressions. Women’s homosocial connections transcend the heteronormative expressions of *qing* in conventional poetic expressions of love, intimacy, and desire. The careful appropriation of male-female poetic formulas and negotiations with textual ambivalences granted women certain kind of freedom in foregrounding their affections for each other.
The rise of women’s *tanci* fiction in the late Ming and Qing shared many similarities in context with the development of women poets’ literary networks. First, similar to the late Ming family-based traditions of women authors’ communities, there was a strong mother-daughter legacy. Quite a number of women *tanci* authors expressed their writing purposes as to please their mothers-in-law or articulate filial love. The reputed *tanci* work *Jade Bracelets* was coauthored by a mother and her daughter. The *tanci* author Zheng Danruo authored the famous nineteenth-century work *Dream, Image, Destiny*. Her daughter Zhou Yingfang (周穎芳, ?–1895) later authored another *tanci* fiction (*Story of a Devoted Son*). Dissemination of *tanci* fiction by women was sometimes passed down by women to their female descendants in the family. *A Tale of Vacuity*, for example, was passed down orally to the daughter of the author Wang Oushang, who also preserved the hand-copied version of the novel by the author herself. Hu Siao-chen rightly pointed out that these feminine traditions of writing, chanting, reading, or teaching *tanci* tales by mothers and daughters refracted and enriched the dynastic traditions of *母教* (mujiao, or mother’s instructions) and endorsed the material authority in the domestic sphere.

Second, the circulation of *tanci* fiction by women in the inner chambers relied on women’s networks, which were through female relatives, friends, or mentor and discipline relationships. These broad networks of women readers provided psychological support and encouragement for the authors’ writings, and often were reflected in women’s prefaces, congratulatory poems, or even editorship of their beloved *tanci* fiction authors. Niu Ruyuan 鈕如媛, who was the sister-in-law of Zhu Suxian, composed a preface for Zhu’s *tanci* novel *Linked Rings of Jade* and provided endorsement of Zhu’s literary talent through the perspective of a close family member. Yu Zhang offered a study of a case of interfamily *tanci* reading and writing between Zheng Danruo, Zhou Yingfang, and Judaoren 橘道人, the author of *A Tanci to Please My Mother-in-Law*. Yu Zhang insightfully argued that in the Ming Qing period, educated women from gentry families had relied on family networks to develop a “shared community of womanhood” in which women “treated the practice of reading and writing as a significant moment of the female experience” (Yu Zhang 21). This shared community of women authors and readers could contribute to a collective process of writing and revising the *tanci* works that were attributed to a certain author’s name.

Third, related to this feminine social community supporting literate women’s writing activities, Ming Qing women also took to active editing and anthologizing to make female writers’ works available through publication. Kang-i Sun Chang’s pioneering 1992 study called attention to a dozen anthologies of women’s poetry and anthologies that contained wide selections of women’s poetry. The compiling of these anthologies reflects the collaborative efforts of both men and women in preserving women’s writings. Building on Chang’s study, Grace S. Fong puts forth the important queries about
the implications of the late imperial anthologizing of women's poetry and the role of “these gender-specific anthologies” in “participating in the process of canon formation” (Fong, “Gender and the Failure of Canonization” 130). Fong argues that “the prevalent hermeneutics of the everyday in women's poetic practice in the Ming and Qing periods had a counter-effect to canon formation. This was the case in spite of, or even because of, the exponential increase in the number of women writing poetry in the last five hundred years of the late imperial era” (130–31). Fong observes that “the collapse of the canonization process from the late Ming on is related to the increasingly quotidian and personal function of poetry in the widening literacy of the late imperial period” (131). Chang’s and Fong's studies on the failure of canonization of women's poetry since the late Ming shed much light on women authors' own efforts of participating in the editing and publication of written tanci, which was a gender-specific vernacular genre largely outside the canon. Ellen Widmer offers a groundbreaking study of female tanci writer and editor Hou Zhi (1764–1829), her tanci work Remaking Heaven, and overlapping aspects of this work with Li Ruzhen's novel Flowers in the Mirror (see Widmer, The Beauty and the Book 70–101).

Hu Siao-chen, in her 1998 article, argues that Hou Zhi had taken on both the position of a tanci writer herself as well as a reader of the time in her editing practices. Hu studies Hou's criticisms of the moral limitations of Chen Duansheng’s Destiny of Rebirth, her sequel to Chen's work Heroes of the Golden Chambers, and her own tanci titled Remaking Heaven. These activities of Hou Zhi, Hu suggests, reflected a difference in Hou's own subjective positions as an editor, author, and reader, as well as a collective horizon of expectations shared by the talented women's communities in the mid-Qing period (see Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chambers). Further, representative works among women's tanci fictions from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries frequently foreground a feminine “implied readership” by appealing for moral and psychological support from them, seeking their criticism and suggestions, or evoking compassion about women's hardship in literary pursuits.

Women's literary, familial, and social networks in late imperial China could have inspired and supported women tanci authors’ creative endeavors, and their construction of a feminine readership. A situated reading of tanci novels by women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in light of the above contexts, suggested productive directions to assess and evaluate contribution of women's tanci fiction in gender and sexuality studies. Sedgwick evokes Heidi Hartmann's definition of patriarchy “in terms of relationships between men’ in making the power relationships between men and women appear to be dependent on the power relationships between men and men” (Sedgwick 711). Sedgwick further suggests that “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an
inherent and potentially active structural congruence” (711). According to Sedgwick, that this mechanism potentially provides the ground for “ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or intensively structured combination of the two” (711). On the one hand, Sedgwick’s study draws heavily from the studies on same-sex love and female homosocial world in the late eighteenth- to twentieth-century Europe and America, and does not address directly the complex implications of patriarchy, gender, and sexuality in dynastic Chinese context. A comparative approach allows the current study to revisit the implications of “patriarchy” in Ming Qing Confucian orthodox discourses with a fresh theoretical reflexivity. Women’s networks, clubs, and exchanges in the Ming Qing period created a social and cultural condition, and allowed literary definitions and recreations of love and marriages on women’s own terms. Accordingly, the literary products of this more open and encouraging environment in poetry, drama, and tanci fiction contained depictions of feminine immortality, women’s religious agency, cross-dressing and masquerade in borrowed masculinity, feminine military agency, friendship, sisterhood or disguised “brotherhood” between cross-dressers, and even same-sex desire and homoerotics.

Li Guiyu’s Pomegranate Flowers possibly provided a textual extension of women’s social, familial, and literary communities through its depictions of feminine utopia via its mythical narrative frame. The novel depicts an imagined feminine utopian sphere called 群芳仙界 (qunfang xianjie, The Immortal Realm of the Flower Goddesses), under the leadership of 碧霄 (Bixiao, Blue Sky), alternatively called the “Master of the Cave of the Flower Goddesses” (Qunfang dongzhu). Bixiao has two sisters 瓊霄 (Qiongxiao, Jade-like Sky) and 素霄 (Suxiao, Clear Sky). The names of the three sisters originated from the classic collection of mythology stories 封神榜 (Fengshenbang, Investiture of the Gods), published during the Ming, though bearing no direct connection to the tales in the volume (see Qiu Jin 2015). Under the leadership of Bixiao, this utopian realm is governed by goddesses, fairy ladies, and maidens at their respective heavenly posts. Four goddesses are in charge of deciphering Daoist classics and composing annals, in order to pass along the histories to the enlightened heroines when they return to the heavenly realm after completing their journeys in the mortal world. The realm was also governed by four sword goddesses, several temporary, inferior female spirits practicing alchemy, as well as honorable fairies, servants, a deer spirit, and a converted fox spirit, among others. This realm under Bixiao’s governance is out of the bounds of Penglai Island and on Mount Jiuhua above Yingzhou. The vast realm of Mount Jiuhua, with numerous caves, is the ideal site for the socialization of female immortals and their bosom sisters. Among the fairies who have been associated with Bixiao and her subordinates, there are Magu 麻姑, Qingnu 青女 and Heng’e 婵娥, the two fairies of Mount Tiantai, the Eight Daoist Immortals of Penglai, the fairy maid Hanhuang 寒簧, and Dong Shuangcheng 董雙城, who is the maid for the
Queen Mother of the West. Depictions of feminine mythical or religious utopias in *tanci* novels are prevalent. Zheng Danruo’s *Dream, Image, Destiny*, a work completed in the mid-nineteenth century, shortly before *Pomegranate Flowers*, portrays twelve flower goddesses who descend to the human world to transform social customs and endorse virtue, and eventually reunite in the celestial realm and live in eternal joy together.

Zheng’s *tanci* particularly highlights the talented and chaste heroines’ rectification of *qing* beyond secular interpretations of love and romance, but rather as embodiment of women’s filial passions, virginal chastity, and dedication to sworn sisterhood. However, although the characters’ celestial roots occasionally allow them certain access to assistance from heavenly agents, the shared fates of the heroines are ridden with personal suffering, sacrifice, death from illness, or even suicide. The feminine utopian realm does not provide as many interventions and rescues from calamities through deus ex machina in the characters’ secular lives, though it does promise an ultimate moral reward for the heroines with immortality in heaven. In comparison, in *Pomegranate Flowers*, the feminine immortal agents are depicted as more frequent forces of intervention in plot development, adding a stronger melodramatic element to the book’s narration. This feminine celestial realm, akin to a literary mirage of a women’s community, maintains active exchanges and interactions with itinerant legendary female immortals.

This mythical all-women realm in *tanci* invites a reconsideration of women’s literary utopia in late imperial and early modern China. Women’s literary utopias, as Qingyun Wu insightfully argues, can be seen at two levels: “as the expression of timeless, universal dreams of the impulse for women to escape and transcend patriarchy, or as the manifestation of the goals of specific women’s movements” (Qingyun Wu 2). Wu herself focuses on the first level in her comparative study of late imperial and modern Chinese literature and western feminist utopian fiction. Wu observes that Qiu Jin’s *Pebbles of the Jingwei Bird* (1905) articulated the cross-cultural impacts of Western ideals of modern utopia on the traditional genre of *tanci* (Wu Qingyun 153). Regarding 鏡花緣 (*Jinghuayuan, Flowers in the Mirror*), authored by Li Ruzhen (李汝珍, 1763–1830), as a feminist utopian novel, Wu suggests that Li’s novel envisions two kinds of separation from the patriarchal world: “sex-role reversal, as in the Country of Women; and spiritual transcendence, as represented by Little Penglai—a Daoist utopia” (Wu Qingyun 90). The closure of *Pomegranate Flowers* poses a similar stance by envisioning the Daoist utopia in Penglai as a prototypical feminine space that not only grants women characters a form of embryonic autonomy outside the patriarchal social system, but a cosmic abode that exists before and after the immortal heroines’ predestined sojourns to the human world. Whereas the late eighteenth-century *tanci* author Chen Duansheng foresees the ideal of a feminine utopia as women’s destiny,
more than half a century later, *Pomegranate Flowers* has articulated a much more explicit and progressive desire for female solidarity, gendered autonomy, as well as social and political agency through the illustrations of a wide spectrum of valiant and extraordinary heroines. Feminine networks through sisterhood, friendship, disguised brotherhood, and mock unions, on the one hand, facilitate expressions of women’s same-sex yearnings, and on the other hand, functions as women characters’ central alliances in social, political, and military endeavors to govern government affairs, appeasing political chaos and defending the nation on the battlefield. It should be noted that in this book, feminine same-sex alliances, rather than being a means for women to flee from the feminine condition in a patriarchal environment, also carry the potential to reform the social reality in which the characters live.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Whereas the current chapter could not completely discuss the rich textual nuances and the myriad articulations of female homoeroticism in Li Guiyu’s work, a revisit of the authorial reinvention of *qing* is proved to be productive in highlighting the text’s creative facilitation of feminine same-sex desire through the disguise of “brotherhood,” drawing attention to the dramatized, plenteous, and triangulated circulations of women-oriented desire. The centrality of women’s desire for women in the story of *Pomegranate Flowers* breaks new ground in written *tanci* traditions’ renovation of gender and sexuality representations, by depicting feminine homoerotic relations in rivalry with conventional heterosexual love. Instead of entirely reproving women’s same-sex desire in depiction of the heroines’ bond, the textual illustrations provide ample examples in which spiritual love is engaged in dialectical interplay with sexual attraction between enamored heroines. The manifold intersecting and gendered relations of the character, on the one hand, bespeak a recurring rivalry between male-oriented heterosexual desire and women’s homoerotic relation, and the conflicting discursive gendered paradigms of love, marriage, and companionship beneath characters’ surges of jealousy, covet, and melodramatic strife. On the other hand, gender dynamics consistently negotiate with, evade, or rewrite heteronormative relations through the characters’ articulations of emotional excess, clashes over unreciprocated love, trials of sexual identities, and confrontations about moral precincts of one another. Li’s *tanci*, in comparison with earlier *tanci* works, takes on a much more self-affirming stance by reclaiming women’s homoerotic affection a moral and ideological position equivalent and frequently superior to heterosexual desire in providing true spiritual companionship and support for women.
Also, this study evokes cross-cultural comparisons of studies on early modern European women’s same-sex relations in literary representations and historical accounts. A study of early modern Chinese literary manifestations of women’s homoerotic desire could be considered in light of what Lee Edelman has identified as “an epistemological impasse,” “an encounter with what can’t be assimilated to any systematic understanding” (in Dinshaw, Edelman et al., 181, 188). Susan Lanser proposes to shift “the emphasis from studying lesbian history to studying ‘lesbian’ and ‘history’ as mutually constitutive” (Lanser, *The Sexuality of History* 9). Peter Coviello focuses on identifying “the very obliquities between past and present from which we might stand to learn something important—and something more, perhaps, than that the past, like the present, is always already queer” (Coviello 395). Building on these discussions, Valerie Traub makes the incisive observation that the elucidations of diverse articulations of female desire and sex in early modernity come “before identity and the formation of modern forms” of queer identity, but ironically appear “not queer enough” to be included as research objects in the study of the supposedly modern-only identities such as “the lesbian” (Traub 280, author’s emphasis). Women’s homoeroticism in *tanci* fiction provides a valuable and thought-provoking case for gender and sexuality studies in that it elides the definitions of established discursive paradigms, and yet foreshadows manifestations of modern modes of feminine same-sex desires and experiences, and thus richly contributes to our understanding of the historiography of feminine homoeroticism in the early modern world through the lens of dynastic women’s literary creations. The question at stake is not merely to redefine *tanci* heroines’ homoerotic desires vis-à-vis early modern queer expressions in a global context, but rather to reconsider these women’s narratives as an inspiration to initiate a more contextualized epistemological, historical, and methodical renovation in our understanding of early modern same-sex intimacies.