Chapter Four

“BEYOND ROUGE AND POWDER”: REWRITING FEMALE TALENT IN SUN DEYING’S JINYUYUAN (AFFINITY OF THE GOLDEN FISH)

IN AFFINITY OF THE GOLDEN FISH (published in 1871), author Sun Deying expressed her ardent yearning for equality for men and women, asserting that those who held prejudiced views “shall use this book as a mirror, carefully read it, to re-dress their wrongdoings and achieve self-awakening. Women shall be men’s equals. Thence there would not be any women who hold regret in the ensuing generations” (20:26). This chapter explores the author’s gendered consciousness as centrally expressed through her reconfigurations of talent and feminine identity in the following aspects. Sun distinguishes herself by writing “beyond rouge and powder.” Rather, to surpass normative writing themes ascribed to femininity in the inner chambers, predominantly love and affection, Sun Deying illustrates feminine talent in light of women’s aptitude for transcending gender norms and achieving literary and artistic excellence, or even social and historical eminence, as men’s equals. Published in an era of chaos and disorder after the Taiping Rebellion, Affinity of the Golden Fish demonstrates a progressive stance in appealing to women’s self-awakening and consciousness
for gendered equality, and most prominently, reinterprets the notion of female talent. First, the text’s depiction of women characters’ erudition and knowledge, their yearning for learning, and their confidence in personal talent and aptitude resonates with Ming Qing women authors’ increased social visibility and impact. Second, Sun Deying’s talented heroines manifest strong self-associations with a literati selfhood. The text reenacts dynastic women’s socialization and exchanges of writings within their networks of family members, relatives, and close personal friends who share similar interests in and knowledge of literature and art. Third, the text takes a revisionist stance on the normative paradox of talent and virtue by depicting filial or chaste feminine characters whose literary and artistic talents give them the power and agency to seek imperial grace and exoneration for culpable parents or a guilty husband. Fourth, aside from learned heroines from gentry and governing classes, the text illustrates a broad array of talented minor female characters, ranging from singsong girls and female storytellers to servant-maidens and concubines. The text invites a reconsideration of the relationship between female talent and social class in late imperial literature, and a reconsideration of how such relationships define literary imagination of feminine subjectivity. Fifth, through elaborate embedded subplots, framed narratives, and tanci scenarios, the text also highlights women’s artistic talent and its association with late imperial vernacular culture. Women characters’ artistic talent is demonstrated in their expertise in poetry, painting, foreign language, music, opera, chess, divination, drinking games, and vernacular storytelling. Women’s learning and erudition surpass the traditional arts of literati scholars. The tanci’s reconfiguration of female talent in this regard constructs a vernacular feminine subjectivity in interaction with, but different from, the literati-feminine norm.

**WRITING BEYOND ROUGE AND POWDER**

Sun Deying has an artistic name of 凌雲仙子 (Lingyun xianzi, “Goddess Riding the Clouds”). The edition I used was a 1903 lithography by Shanghai shuju consisting of twenty volumes. I used the version held at the Shanghai City Library. The work largely contains narration in seven-character lines, without resorting to theatrical formulas of 脚色 characters (jiaose), and occasionally contains some 十字句 (shiziju), or ten-character lines. Sheng Zhimei characterizes this tanci work as 敘事體彈詞 (xushiti tanci), or “narrative tanci.” The work contains two prefaces, both authored by women and dated the Tenth Year of Emperor Tongzhi’s Reign (1871). The first preface was composed by a Woyun nüshi, called Wu Xiaolu, and another was by self-identified female tanci author Niu Ruyuan, Sun Deying’s sister-in-law. According to Bao Zhenpei, based on the preface by Niu Ruyuan, Sun was possibly born on or after 1841. She was
a daughter of the Sun family who were from the clan rooted in Gui’An county in the east Zhejiang province. Her father took a post as a government assistant in Xijiang, and then received an appointment at Xunguan, where their family resided for thirty years. Niu Ruyuan 紐如媛 praises Sun for her exceptional talent, even in childhood, and her interest in reading and writing: “Whenever she had a moment of rest from needlework and embroidery, she could not put down the books. From the classics, history, and writings by the various masters to studies of strange things and miscellaneous biographies, she would read them and know them by heart” (Niu 1). Departing from the convention of coquettish “rouge and powder” writings, Sun was praised for knowing the events from ancient times to the present, surpassing the dreary matters of the rise and fall of current events. She perceives fame and fortune as floating clouds, and finds lifelong pleasure in playing the zither and reading books” (1). In her youth, Sun studied by herself without instructions: “She was self-disciplined in reading and chanting poetry, discreet in mood and generous in character, and was very much reminiscent of the manners of the legendary novel women in history” (1). Niu records in her preface that Sun, from a young age, had the intention of spending her life serving her parents and did not want to get married.

Acknowledging the symbiotic relationship between women’s lives and their writings, Niu Ruyuan expresses dissatisfaction with the reception of women’s works because of gender prejudice, and she endorses Sun Deying as an exemplar of women’s accomplished authorship. From Niu Ruyuan’s preface, the readers could see that after the author’s mother suffered a stroke and fell very ill, she expressed her wish to remain unmarried and serve her parents for the rest of her life. The parents and elders of the family sought to dissuade her to no avail and finally consented to her life choice. Her mother passed away of aggravated illness after the family had to flee by sea from rebellions in Canton. She had then taken to Buddhist self-study and writing of tanci from 1863 to 1868, and thus completed the work Affinity of the Golden Fish (Bao, Manuscripts of Treatise 275). The preface by Wu Xiao’e 吳小娥 offers descriptions of Deying’s literary talent and her writings’ endorsement of women; in Wu’s words, “one does not have to be a man to establish virtue or to make great achievements” (Wu Xiao’e 1). Bao Zhenpei writes that the tone and address in the preface indicate Wu was a female friend of Sun Deying’s, of about the same age (Bao, Manuscripts of Treatise 274).

Like previous tanci works by women, Sun Deying’s tanci is addressed to understanding women audiences who in return lend encouragement and endorsement to the author in her long and assiduous writing process. As the authorial narrator confesses, “My sisters frequently urged me on, and friends in the inner chambers have given me many unearned praises” (4:1). When the author’s mother passed away after being paralyzed for three years, Deying relied on her female friends’ support through
this traumatic personal loss; in her words, “My benevolent female friends in the inner chambers have resorted to kind and healing words to alleviate my worries and change my mind” (3:21). Sun Deying’s extensive insertions of authorial narration and reflection, Hu Siao-chen argues, illustrate the increased space and autonomy for women tanci writers of this period in shifting the boundaries between the private and the public, sharing personal life experiences with a targeted audience akin to trusted friends in the boudoir (Hu, “Burning the Midnight Oil” 148). Such increased autonomy for women writers is addressed in the preface by Niu Ruyuan, Sun’s sister-in-law, at the beginning of this tanci work. Hu Siao-chen argues that these textual and paratextual features suggest an increased social acceptance of women writers and their writings as self-representing texts (149). Sun Deying’s strategic alignment of a woman author’s private emotional realm with writings addressed to a readership in the public sphere represents women authors’ efforts to cope with anxiety about writing and orthodox discourse about feminine virtue.

The duality of private and public spheres determines the function of tanci fiction in articulating women’s 私情私志 (sijing sizhi, private emotions and ideals) through words intended for the public. Hu argues that Sun Deying’s Jinyuyuan, and Qiu Xinru’s Bishenghua constructed an imaginative private sphere that is an intersection or interpolation of private time and private space (153). Sun’s reconfiguration of the gendered division between private and public spheres evokes relevance to studies of gender and history on a broader scale. Joan Kelly, in her article “The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory,” stresses that the division between “female sphere” as “private” and “male sphere” as “public” is an ideological split, rather than being based on biological difference. Likewise, Patricia Demers points out that “the interanimation of public and private realms is part of the legacy of early modern women writers” in England (Demers 128). In the imperial Chinese context, learned women still uphold the division of gendered roles between the inner chambers and the exterior social sphere in terms of managing domestic duties and socially inscribed roles in terms of labor. Women writers, rather than disrupting the inner/outer divide, still observe and sustain this division. Activities and creations of women on subjects related to traditional womanly work or domestic duties are considered legitimate in a social and cultural division of labor affirmed by patriarchal tenets. On the other hand, late imperial women writers whose publications position themselves in the public sphere always “had to defend themselves against accusations of lewdness” while managing to continue to write and to find venues of publication (Bruneau 164). The constraints imposed on women to access the outer sphere also impelled them to appropriate and reconfigure the inner sphere as a space of their own. In light of Sun Deying’s work, the process of writing allows her to express a singular, private identity, as illustrated in the authorial narration below:
I do not have the instruction of a wise teacher, nor do I boast exceptional talent and surpass others in the word. I read, toil, and seek solution myself, without coherence in writing nor trespassing of conventions. I dare to ponder on disseminating this work and passing it down to later generations, and only want to express my ideals and yearnings. Humbly I bow and beseech my female friends not to laugh me, but to pity me for my lack of knowledge. If there are errors and inaccuracies in my writing, I shall seek truly learned friends to revise and expurgate the work into a better condition. (20:1)

This interior sphere of writing could be taken literally as a reference to Sun Deying’s cloistered space of living and writing. Also it is an emblematic and gendered space of women’s literary creativity and pursuit, indicating the author’s commitment to writing for a woman’s personal interest instead of following the literati conventions of writing for public consumption, or writing in response to ideas and subjects in the public domain. The text suggests that the implied readers of Sun’s work are appreciative and learned women audiences sharing the same figurative sphere and community.

Women writers’ efforts to transform and utilize the domestic sphere as a site of literary activities, however, had to be balanced with their evolved domestic roles and duties due to life-changing events such as marriage, childbearing, caring for elders, household management, or unfortunate incidents such as illness, poverty, or personal loss of a spouse, parent, or child. Among the Qing women tanci authors, Chen Duansheng and Qiu Xinru started writing their works before marriage, but both ceased writing for a long period of time after marriage before picking up their brushes again in middle age. The late eighteenth-century author Zhu Suxian took to writing during her widowhood and finished Linked Rings of Jade at an elderly age. A later writer Wang Oushang completed her work A Tale of Vacuity during her widowhood. Others, like Liang Desheng (梁德繩, 1771–1847) and Huang Xiaoqin, found more time and freedom to commit to writing tanci at an older age. Sun Deying, who remained celibate and unmarried all her life, was one of the few authors who completed her tanci works at an early age before marriage. Similar examples of women completing their tanci at an early and unmarried age include the anonymous daughter who coauthored Jade Bracelets with her mother, the anonymous author of晝錦堂記 (Zhoujingtang ji, Tale of the Daylight Hall), and Cao Xiangpu who wrote 雙魚珮 (Shuangyu pei, Double Fish Pendant) before dying at twenty-one. Unlike other authors, Sun Deying was determined to remain celibate even at a young age and chose to embrace a cloistered religious life in the name of serving her parents. Based on Niu Ruyuan’s preface to Sun’s tanci, Bao Zhenpei proposes that Sun completed her tanci in her late twenties. Three years after the book’s completion, Niu Ruyuan composed the preface for the book’s publication (Bao and Xiaoyi 275).
Susan Mann observes that women writers of the mid-Qing, because of “their literacy, their religiosity, and their own strivings for comfort and security,” helped to provoke the social and moral discourses on marriage (Mann, “Grooming a Daughter for Marriage” 111). The life and writing of late Qing author Sun Deying is a similarly thought-provoking example of Qing women authors’ transformation of, if not emphatic challenge to, the social order and the refashioning of gender roles in a progressive yet polemical historical era (111). Affinity of the Golden Fish contains explicit articulations about feminine consciousness and reflections on gender equality. In juan 1, the authorial narrator articulates these reflections: “men and women are born the same, and should not be treated with differences. So strange that many in the world worry about having daughters, and only hope for giving birth to sons. It should be known that such thoughts are ignorant and unenlightened, for familial principles and grace should not be damaged” (1:1) The authorial narrator then goes on to evoke historical examples of feminine heroism:

Since ancient times, many women in the inner chambers surpass men in their courage and righteousness. Their exceptional deeds move heaven and earth, and they are no less than exceptional “heroines wearing head-handkerchiefs.” Who says that men are necessarily superior to their rouged peers? Behold, the disguised Huang Chong’gu served as an imperial official, the filial Cao E committed suicide to honor her deceased father, upholding the cardinal virtue. The most resourceful Mulan fought at the borderlines. The brave and exceptional Xun Guan climbed over the city wall to seek help for her besieged father. The everlasting fame of General Yang’s armies is mostly owed to the brave female generals of the family. (1:1)

The author goes on to advise her readers, “Do not become joyful or sad for giving birth to a son or a daughter. So long as one treats sons and daughters with equal love, the children will have exceptionally filial hearts” (1:1). This outspoken authorial consciousness about gender equality underlies Sun’s tanci, which is written precisely “to express the ambition of women in this world” (1:1). The plot illuminates women’s gendered consciousness and their striving for equal access to societal pursuits with their male counterparts. The story focuses on two cross-dressed heroines. A character named Qin Meng’e 秦夢娥, betrothed to a protagonist Qian Jingchun 錢景春, is forced to disguise herself as a man to flee when her father, together with the families of Minister Qian and Minister Feng, are wrongly accused of treason. After serving the nation as a military general, she reassumes her feminine identity and marries her fiancé. Meng’e is awarded the title of Countess of Dingshan and becomes the adopted daughter of the empress, with the title of Princess Shengping (昇平公主, Shengping Gongzhu). After her refeminization, Meng’e garners a role of authority in the family, appeasing disputes between the wives of Jingchun in a polygamous marriage, serving her
parents and parents-in-law, and raising children of her own. Another heroine named Qian Shurong disguises herself as a man and flees from a family calamity. She takes the name Zhu Yunping 竺雲屛 and becomes a prime minister as well as a mentor for the prince. After rescuing her father and relatives from a calamity, Yunping refuses to return to her feminine identity. She is unwilling to compromise when repeatedly provoked and tested by her father and fiancé in private and at the court. To appease and distract her pressing fiancé Mei Lanxue 梅蘭雪, Yunping serves as a go-between and arranges for her “sister” from her adopted family to marry Lanxue. Later, she suggests that the emperor command Lanxue to take Princess Lixian as a second wife, and she persuades Lanxue to take the loyal maid Luo Linxiang as a concubine. Though declining a consummate marriage with Lanxue, Yunping ingeniously finds substitutes for herself and arranges a polygamous marriage for her fiancé through strengthening interfamilial ties and connection with the royal clan.

In comparison with Chen Duansheng’s Meng Lijun, Yunping has the resourcefulness for avoiding repetitive trials and tests with quick wit and intelligent maneuvers. To resolve the challenge of serving her aged parents while living her own life in disguise, she suggests that her own “wife” Li Yu’e in the mock union become an adopted daughter of her birth parents. Yu’e is given the role of a substitute daughter to perform the heroine’s filial duties. To dispel the suspicious emperor’s doubts about her being a woman, Yunping readily takes in two royal maidens when the emperor gives them to her, but secretly dismisses them, allowing them to marry their own previously betrothed fiancés. Having made full arrangements for the care of her parents and her fiancé, Yunping plans to leave officialdom and pursue immortality through Buddhist practice. On her journey, a monk enlightens her, revealing that she and her “wife” were both deities who were banished to earth to mend their misconduct in heaven, and that they would return to the immortal realm when their deeds in serving the country and their families were accomplished. Yunping is informed that she, though having been loyal to the nation, has been much lacking in filial piety. Hence, she returns to her family and the court, and privately confesses her secret to her parents and adoptive parents. Her eventual compromise with her parents to complete her filial duties could be considered as a belated concession to orthodox values, and serves her private purposes of achieving freedom and moral fulfillment. After completing this filial action in private, Yunping does not lose her public identity as the minister and continues to serve in her official position. She later succeeds in leaving the post and becoming an immortal with her “wife” with the assistance of an immortal intermediary. In comparison with Qiu Xinru’s talented heroine Jiang Dehua and Li Guiyu’s ambitious Gui Hengkui, both of whom have to undergo refeminization upon revelation of their true identity, the learned Zhu Yunping manifestly enjoys more freedom in deciding her own destiny and successfully escapes from the confines of the domestic space.
RECONSIDERING FEMALE TALENT AND LITERATI SELFHOOD

Women’s literary and artistic talents receive prominent endorsement throughout Sun Deying’s book. The author herself candidly describes her own interest in reading and writing:

All my life I do not have other interests, but to collect tens of thousands of books and ponder on them. By chance I spiritedly put down these words, *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, and now without knowing it I have compiled seventeen volumes. I dare to claim that every word is exquisite, and fortunately not every sentence follows the form of folk songs. Loyalty, chastity, filial piety, and righteousness are innate in everyone; virtue and benevolence are endowed in every individual’s nature. Do not say that flowing words could not contain lasting meaning. There must be moments in the writing that awaken the hearts of the readers, and dispel their illusions. (17:1)

Like the talented author, the leading heroine in the story is a learned woman who aspires to emulate the achievements of historical figures and to establish a personal career, rather than contemplating her life after marriage after her father arrange her engagement to a talented scholar named Mei Lanxue. While praising the ancient heroes for their “illustrious deeds that are applauded and extolled for tens and thousands of ages,” she expresses anxiety about her imminent marriage: “I would have travelled to this world without reward, and could not, raise my eyebrows and release my breath and gain fame for myself. After a fleeting life in this world, I shall return to the realm of illusion and emptiness, without being known. Even though I may have enjoyed fortune and affluence, what worth does a life like that have after all?” (1:5). She contemplates to herself:

Ay, since ancient times there are quite a few heroines wearing head kerchiefs, all of whom possess valor, bounteouness, and the character of true heroes. Their lofty ideals well surpass those of their rouged peers. Spread afar, their enduring names and reputations last for tens of thousands of years. Spread afar, literature about their extraordinary deeds gains admiration from later generations. Even though my ambitions are beyond ordinary, how could I find the way to truly commit myself to making great accomplishments? Hai, how could my wish be satisfied by the matter of marriage and commonplace pursuits in the world? (1:5)

The heroine’s well-stated yearning for fame and achievement beyond the inner chambers is reminiscent of numerous resonant examples in women’s *tanci* fiction. Hu Siao-chen, in an important study of *Blossom from the Brush* and *Affinity of the Golden*
Fish, points out that talented heroines’ compelling expressions of personal ambitions for fame and achievement often foreshadow their choice of cross-dressing later in the plot, for it is impossible for women in the inner chambers to transcend their inscribed gender roles and access or participate in social matters (Hu, “Burning the Midnight Oil” 166–75). Notably, Shurong’s servingmaid Lianyan 簾燕 expresses much understanding by confirming Shurong’s thought: “My lady, you can compose tens and thousands of words and surpass other ladies; having known thousands of scrolls by heart, your talent outdoes the scholars. Your talent should be well exercised in this world, for you are an extraordinary lady; your words and deeds shall be circulated in future years, and you shall be lauded for your brilliance and remarkability” (1:6). Inspired by Shurong’s example, even the maid Lianyan is determined to decline her engagement made in childhood and remain by Shurong’s side as a handmaid. As later revealed in this tanci work, servingmaids, rather than merely being depicted as inferior, minor characters, may also possess certain literary or artistic talents, and also frequently express intellect and insight. Late in the same juan, Shurong, feeling her ambitions for the future to be thwarted, composes a poem to express her sense of frustration and helplessness:

For long I have parted with worldly concerns and the snare of desire,
Rouge and coiffure could no longer gain my interest.
Not longing for a life of luxury in lofty mansions,
I only hope that my writings will have a reputation of being worthy and agreeable.
Fragrant in aroma, Osmanthus flowers invite me to pluck a branch;
Close yet afar, the path to a recluse’s life is not open to me.
Do not say that Heaven is merciful and pities man,
This one’s resolute ambitions have to be divulged in the end. (1:12)

Notably, Shurong is prompted into cross-dressing when her father has been wrongly accused of treason by the minister Feng Ruojin 封若金. It is in this condition of life and death, and under the pressing need to rescue her father and seek revenge for him, that Shurong is granted the obligation to take on a male identity and seek a social life using her talent. As the plot shows, filial piety provides the incentive and narrative probability for the heroine to apply her talent outside the inner chambers. Determined to disguise herself as a man in order to find the whereabouts of her imprisoned parents and save them, she states, “I myself dare to boast expansive learning as deep as the sea. If I attend the exam, I shall become a top scholar and receive a title at the Golden Palace. How I wish that I could rank high in the exam and be received by the Emperor; I would certainly seek reprisal for this immense wrongdoing and accomplish great deeds” (3:15). Whereas the thought of cross-dressing sprouts as a wish to repay her parents’ grace, to accompany them in prison, or, in the most desperate
situation, to “receive the death penalty for my parents,” she states her longing to obtain officialdom and serve at the court, for “wearing a gold embroidered robe and jade rings is true nobility” (3:5).

The inquisitive heroines’ yearning for knowledge and their confidence in their literary aptitudes could be understood in the context of Ming Qing women authors’ increased social visibility and impact. The celebration of women’s education and learning since early Qing provided social and historical conditions for familial support for women’s literary pursuits. Chen Dongyuan observes that the rise of women’s education or nüjiao 女教 in early Qing was unrivaled (Chen Dongyuan 275–83). A pioneering work about women’s education is 女學 (Nüxue, Women’s Learning) by Lan Dingyuan (藍鼎元, 1680–1733), completed in 1712. While emphasizing the penultimate importance of women’s virtue, Lan went into great detail in defining women’s study. He observes,

Women’s learning differs from that of men. Men can take to learning all their lives, and hence can find their path through the classics and history, and gain deep and broad understanding of a hundred schools of thought. Women’s time for learning is no more than ten years. Then they marry and become committed to household affairs, and shoulder responsibilities of a hundred kinds. Unless they are concentrated in study, it is not easy for them to gain thoroughness in learning. To study without breadth, she would not have much gain. To have a broad scale of interest in learning, one will lose the focus for study, and find it difficult to make choices in style and genre. Considering these, this book Women’s Learning is indeed indispensable! (Lan 1)

Similar endeavors of literati scholars advocating for women’s learning include 教女遺規 (Jiaonü yigui, Repository of Rules for Education of Women) by Chen Hongmou (陳宏謀, 1697–1771), and 女教經傳通纂 (Nüjiao jingzhuan tongzuan, Compilation of Classics and Histories for the Instruction of Girls and Women) by Ren Qiyun (任啟運, 1670–1744).

Women writers promoted female learning as well. An eighteenth-century female author from Guangdong named Li Wanfang (李晚芳, artistic name Luyi 萊漪) authored a work 女學言行纂 (Nüxue yanxing zuan, Record of Words and Deeds on Women’s Learning), which further developed the concept of nüxue. She claims her book “compiles together the worthy words and honorable deeds of famous scholars and ladies since Zhou and Han dynasties, with an intention to amend the missing parts in Zhou Offices and Dai’s Book of Rites in order to assist women in enhancing the governance of the household,” and she occasionally offers her own thoughts (Li Wanfang 26). She proposes four important components of women’s study, including “removing one’s selfishness,” “observing the rites,” “reading books,” and “managing affairs.” Women’s study
for the author is guided with the purpose of disciplining her mind and deeds, and establishing the basis for governing the household (for discussions of Zhang Xuecheng on women’s learning, see Mann, “‘Fuxue’ (Women’s Learning) by Zhang Xuecheng” 40–62; Precious Records 89–91). For the author, women’s learning, rather than distracting them from commitment to women’s duties and responsibilities, grooms and prepares them for their wifely and motherly roles.

In a comprehensive review of nüjiao (women’s education) and nüxue (women’s learning), Li Guotong cites poet Wu Qi (吳琪, 1644–1661), who commented in her self-preface to a poetry collection 紅蕉集 (Hongjiaoji, Red Plantain Collection):

“And yet why do women of ancient times and at present have to be banned from poetry? Regarding those who are chaste and calm in manners, there is not a lack of people who can compose poetry; as to those who behave with liberty, they may not even know how to write simple poetry on daily objects such as meadows and flowers. Some may transgress major moral principles, and yet say that women’s speech shall not surpass the inner chambers, and look at all women in this way, how digressed they are from the right path!” (Wu Qi 8). Wu Qi expresses disagreement with those who perceive women’s writing and virtue as a contradiction, and proposes that women could also achieve 不朽 (buxiu) or an “unperishable” literary status.

In a historical study of Ming Qing women’s educational books, Li Guotong considers three categories: (1) didactic texts catering to women as readers, such as 閰範 (Guifan, Rules of the Chamber) by Lu Xinwu (呂新吾, 1536–1618) and 女兒經 (Nu’erjing, The Classics for Girls); (2) excerpts about women’s education from family regulatory writings and clan rules; and (3) persuasive writings for women readers in folk narratives, particularly 勸善書 (quanshan shu, morality books). The Ming Qing era witnessed increased social expectations of women’s competence in carrying on the tradition of mu-jiao (mother’s education) and in performing educational roles for their descendants. According to Li, the awakening feminine consciousness displayed in women writers’ compositions during the Ming and Qing had far surpassed the parameters of family learning and women’s education, and heralded a new form of literary enlightenment. Women writers of the era, rather than being the addressed audience for and recipient of orthodox moral values, developed nascent forms of subjectivities through subjunctive expressions of their feelings and thoughts. Their writings, particularly poetry, Li proposes, consist of diverse kinds, such as self-expressing poems articulating their personal aspirations through historical figures or events, poems to family expressing longing or giving advice, and poems instructing their children in behavior and moral conduct. Women who achieved literary reputations relied on the endorsements of male members of their natal families, such as a father or a brother. Some gained visibility thanks to their spouses, who were scholars. A third group of women received endorsements from their children or from younger male relatives, such as a cousin.
In light of studies on women’s *tanci* fiction, Hu Siao-chen acknowledges that *mujiao* plays a crucial part in *tanci* texts. The moral deficiency of Feilong in Hou Zhi’s *tanci* novel *Jinguijie* could be contributed to the failure of *mujiao* or Feilong’s mother’s improper education of her daughter before marriage. On the other hand, the important influence and outcome of *mujiao* could also be found in the mother-daughter legacy among *tanci* fiction authors. In her study of elite women in the Ming-Qing Jiangnan, Dorothy Ko notes that “women’s culture emanated from the intimate bonds between mother and daughter in the inner quarters,” and that such intimacy was often cultivated in the process of “a literary education provided by the mother” (Ko, “Pursuing Talent and Virtue” 12). *Tanci* fiction by women authors of the Jiang Nan region from late Ming to Qing expressively articulates this mother-daughter legacy in the creation and sustainment of this literate women’s culture. The seventeenth-century work *Jade Bracelets* was self-identified as a *tanci* coauthored by a mother and her daughter. Zheng Danruo, the author of *Dream, Image, Destiny*, was the mother of Zhou Yingfang, author of the later *tanci* fiction *Story of a Loyal Son*. Many authors declared their writing purpose was to entertain their mothers or mothers-in-law, as in the case of Qiu Xinru, who authored *Blossoms from the Brush* and *娱萱草弹词* (Yuxuancao *tanci*, *A Tanci Work to Please My Mother-In-Law*). *Tanci* fiction has been passed down from the authors to their descendants, especially to daughters, as narratives of family legacy and women’s education. The author’s hand-copied edition of *A Tale of Vaccumity* by Wang Ou’shang has been passed down generation by generation to her daughter, granddaughter, and finally great-granddaughter. Every generation of female descendants chanted the tale to their children as a way of celebrating continuing the legacy of women’s learning.

As Hu proposes, women’s *tanci* fiction played a role of “women’s textbooks” (*funü jiaoke shu*) in late Qing. In mid Qing, Hou Zhi’s works were representative of the tradition of *mujiao*, and provided a transition between *tanci* novels in high Qing focusing on women’s self-expression, and late Qing *tanci* works that focus on the educational potentials of traditional *tanci* tales. Hu Siao-chen points out that, as manifested in Ming Qing women’s *tanci* fiction, in terms of women’s education before their marriage, the father’s instruction had to be channeled through the mother’s instruction to reach the daughter (Hu, “Burning the Midnight Oil” 196). Women’s family education by the mother is depicted in *Affinity of the Golden Fish*. Among the Han dynasty guidebooks for instructing women, the eminent female scholar Ban Zhao’s *女诫* (*Nüjie, Instruction for Women*) articulated the importance of female literacy, which is essential in the relationship between men and women. Ban Zhao’s interpretation of classical texts envisions marriage as “a reciprocal relationship that depended on the wife’s ability to ‘serve’ her husband as well as on his ability to ‘control’ her, both service and control depended on the ‘worthiness’ (*xian*) of each other” (Mann,
“Grooming a Daughter for Marriage” 102). Like men, women should receive education so they can “serve properly in the domestic realm” (102). Chen Hongmou stresses the utmost importance of educating women for wifely roles and family living, for “a family’s future advantage is tied to the purity and the education of its women” (Chen, Hongmou 1). In this light, parents’ grooming of a daughter for understanding and obeying norms governing marriage is an essential aspect of instructing women. In Affinity of the Golden Fish, Qin Meng’e resumes her feminine identity and marries Qian Meiyou. Before her marriage, her foster mother Princess Jin instructs her on the importance of virtue and advises her to harness her militant vigor and follow ancient rituals at home:

You should be aware that filial duties to the parents begin with full obedience. You should assist their dinners, give greetings, and follow women’s duties, inquire about their conditions and abide by their instructions. If the siblings-in-law have any concerns, you should be gentle and listen to them instead of insisting on your own wishes. Peace and tranquility in the inner chambers should be esteemed by the couple; you two shall enjoy harmony and love and not break any regularities. A proud character cannot be considered virtuous; breaking apart in relationship openly is even more against the rituals. (9:18)

This instruction by Princess Jin, Meng’e’s foster mother stresses the importance of obedience to the rituals and the priority of domestic harmony at the root of the Confucian family structure. On the other hand, Susan Mann notes, the bride’s obedience was essential because “the rituals expressing obedience were coupled with those emphasizing responsibility and authority” (Mann, “Grooming a Daughter for Marriage” 99). Obedience not only “upheld the authority of the elders but also . . . was essential to the harmony of the household; one day the bride herself would have to command obedience from younger women” (99). Simultaneously, “all power consigned to wives in the domestic realm was constrained on every side by fine distinctions of age and status. Teaching women how to use this power became an obsession of mid-Qing scholars” (99). In the text, Princess Jin reminds Meng’e to be exempt from feminine jealousy and rivalry against Qian Meiyou’s other wives, particularly Zhang Jingshu, who is no less than a royal sister of Meng’e’s. Also, she instructs Meng’e that to achieve ultimate moral integrity, she should pursue the accomplishment of feminine virtue. In the princess’s words, “My dear daughter, you have been claimed as an exceptional woman of the world; you should also strive to be widely known as a virtuous woman” (9:18).

Princess Jin is an exemplary of mujiao, even though Meng’e is only her adopted daughter. Specifically, this example characterizes women’s education for marriage. The paramount education for marriage was training in 四德 (si de, the Four Attributes) appropriate to wives: proper virtue, speech, carriage, and work. In contrast with Princess
Jin, Lixian’s capricious and scheming stepmother serves as an example of the failure of motherly education: her lack of moral righteousness is such that the daughter Lixian eventually has to take on the mother’s role to transform her mother’s conduct.

Discussions of women’s talent by tanci authors are widespread in their writings. In *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity* by Jin Fangquan, the author reiterates the ostensible incompatibility of women’s talent and their well-being. In commenting on a talented heroine Quan Huiniang 全慧娘 who dies early because of illness, she says, “With talent but not longevity, one’s regrets last for many years. Even though talented she cannot contravene her mandate” (4:94). The author takes on a didactic tone: “I advise women in the inner chambers to hold onto their ignorance, for intelligence harms one’s fortune, and talent is likewise hurtful” (4:94). A similar example can be found in a conversation between a female character Cui Ziying and her cousin Cui Lanjun 崔蘭君. The elder Ziying laments the short lifespan of talented women: “I caution my friends in the inner chambers to avoid taking up the writing brush, for those who are of a shorter life are mostly poetesses” (10:43). However, the young Lanjun squarely disagrees, saying that she would still prefer those who have exceptional talent and a rather weak fortune. She argues, “One’s life of a hundred years is ephemeral as a drop of morning dew. Only a scholar’s name could last for centuries. What is extraordinary about those common people even though they have had fortune? All the world rejoins in appreciating the works by truly talented authors. Like my virtuous uncle, he could hold the official’s tablet and earnestly serve the emperor at the court. As to heroic women, there are a few examples in history, and they could gain lasting fame in history after death” (10:44–45). Zheng Zhenwei observes that the author, through Lanjun’s words, contradicts the commonly shared belief that women’s talent is harmful for their health and fortune in life.

These irresolute and sometimes self-contradictory stances about female talent between the authorial narrator’s statement and the female characters’ observations, in Jin Fangquan’s *tanci* and a large number of *tanci* texts by women, recall what Idema and Grant identify among self-censoring elite women authors as a “tension between the desire to participate in literary life and the social pressure to refrain from writing,” which resulted in what could be considered as “multiple personalities,” and sometimes became identified as a condition equivalent to spiritual possession (Idema and Grant 165). The popular conception of dynastic women’s talent as harmful for their fate has been articulated in many famous texts. The reputed late Ming writer Ye Shaoyuan attributed the early death of his wife, Shen Yixiu, and two daughters Ye Wanwan and Ye Xiaoluan to the burden of their talents. In *隨園全集* (Suiyuan quanji, Complete Records of the Suiyuan Garden), a collection edited by Yuan Mei (袁枚, 1716–1798), the three younger sisters of Yuan Mei, and other female poets, frequently lamented the incongruity of women’s fate and feminine literary talent. Among women authors of
the Ming and Qing, some expressed opposition to the conundrum of women’s talent and fate, including Yuan Mei’s granddaughters Yuan Jia (袁嘉, 1793–1853) and Yuan Shou (袁綬, 1795–?) (see Liu Yongcong, “A Glance at Views on Women’s Talent and Fate,” 71). In opposition to these writers, some women expressed understanding and acceptance of the belief that women’s talent could harm their lives. The female ci poet He Shuangqing (賀雙卿, eighteenth century) suffered a laborious and miserable life with a domineering husband and an abusive sister-in-law. However, she considered her suffering to be 夙業 (suye, old score carried over from previous incarnation). Liu Yongcong considers He Shuangqing’s attitude to be a conservative one ridden with the influence of karmic bonds and the endurance of suffering in exchange for a congenial next life. However, the female poet’s text does not entirely relinquish itself to this idea. Rather, He insisted that a woman should not understate or conceal her talents when facing controversies about her overbearing aptitude. She should confront such conceptions and squarely face the karmic outcome related to them rather than restraining her inborn traits.

Women tanci authors’ reflections on talent, writing, and personal lives are abundant in their authorial insertions, self-prefaces, or opening and closing lines in individual chapters. Chen Duansheng resorted to large amounts of authorial statements in Destiny of Birth as parts of her self-portrayal and included copious reflections on women’s literary talent. Hu Siao-chen, through her study of a cluster of women tanci authors including Chen Duansheng, Zheng Danruo, Qiu Xinru, and Hou Zhi, argues that the vernacular form of tanci fiction allowed late imperial women a medium of writing to express their gendered consciousness. In particular, women authors of tanci novels made great efforts in distinguishing their work from popular tanci songs or stories that utilize narrative conventions to evoke readers’ illicit desires or transgressions of orthodox moral values. Instead, prefaces or self-narratives depict authors of tanci as erudite and virtuous women who were well read in classics and highly capable in composing poetry (such an example could be found in the depiction of Zhu Suxian in the preface of Linked Rings of Jade).

Tanci authors’ revisionist stance on the question of women’s talent, as discussed above, encompasses explicit authorial self-endorsement of their identities as writers, their active inscriptions of gender in codes of the tanci genre and their female readerships, and their cautious allusions to normative discourses about talent and femininity, all in an effort to incarnate new ideals of feminine intellect into established literary canons. Characterization of erudite women in the fictional narrative, in this light, rather than mirroring elite men’s ideals of selfhood, takes on a more vigorous and diverse form beyond emulation of the elements of the Confucian-literati scholar. In Affinity of the Golden Fish, after Shurong disguises herself as a man, she takes on the name of Zhu Yunping. Her “wife” Li Yu’e, daughter of a censor-in-chief, enjoys the reputation...
of 閨中女博士 (Guizhong nü boshi, a female scholar in the inner chambers) (3:18). Not only is Yu’e cultured in poetry and painting, she even masters the ancient art of divination. Being a friend of the heroine Qin Mengxiang, Yu’e resorts to her knowledge of 金錢卦 (jinqiangua, Golden Coin Diagrams) and predicts that Meng’e’s parents shall be rescued and released from prison once her younger brother passes the civil exam and becomes appointed as an official (3:18). Yu’e’s talent even catches the empress’s eye with her exceptionally refined painting and poem on a fan, a gift to Qin Meng’e. Deeply appreciative of Yu’e’s outstanding talent, the empress takes her in as a daughter and grants her the title 清平公主 (Qingping Gongzhu, Princess of Purity and Peace) (9:19). The heroines often compose and appreciate poetry as an entertainment or leisure activity. Women’s literary talents are encouraged and approved by their family. The heroine Qian Shurong’s father initially thinks that Shurong has committed suicide by drowning herself to protect her own chastity when forcefully taken by the malicious Minister Shui. Reminiscing about his daughter, her father laments, “This daughter of mine was born with intelligence and talent, and thus I particularly adore her. Her writings are so polished and did not need correction; her poetry and prose works all are peerless in terms of excellence. Not to mention how skilled, refined and outstanding her calligraphy is. In painting she also has an aptitude that can appeal to the immortals” (9:15).

The heroine herself, who later takes on the name of Zhu Yunping, boasts a talent in observing and interpreting celestial signs and images (4:1). This exceptional talent becomes crucial later in the story (11:5). One night, as Yunping and Yu’e take a stroll in the garden, the curious Yu’e asks Yunping to explain to her how to read constellations and identify the star for the emperor (帝星, dixing). Yunping points out the star and gives a forecast of the mandate of the state: “Our dynasty already displays abnormal signs; great changes and calamities shall take place in several decades. Even though the emperor is wise, sagacious, and follows the principles, the luster of the emperor’s star is still quite dim. . . . Not for long; there will be chaos and war from the four corners of the nation. Man’s power will not be able to change the way of heaven; how could I witness the decline of the nation while serving at the court every day?” (11:3). Having perceived the perilous prospect of the court, Yunping makes the determination to leave her post. Yet she also detects a surreptitious star attempting to quickly attack the star for the heir. Alerted by this, Yunping summons Mei Lanxue and rushes to the prince’s palace, arriving in time to thwart an attempted assassination. The crisis turns out to be a political scheme to kill the heir of the throne by Prince Cheng Wang and his concubine. The ancient practice of observing heavenly signs and predictions of the mandate of the nation is traditionally only conducted by celestial officers designated by the emperors. The learning and knowledge of observing and interpreting astrological signs, accordingly, implies the capacity to predict political disorder and
the mandate of the rulers, and therefore wields significant power in political decision making. Rather than simply being considered as mastery of magic skills, the heroine’s access to such knowledge in the text indicates a bold imagination of official divinatory practices, suggesting the heroine’s intellectual power to influence the hierarchical social and political structures of the state.

The plot foreshadowing the exposure of the cross-dressed Yunping’s true identity differs quite significantly from established traditions in earlier tanci. Yunping’s self-composed poem on one of her scenery portraits rouses suspicion in her elder brother Qian Jingchun about her true identity. He shares this discovery with Prince Ning Wang, who observes, “Not only is the painting most exquisite and refined, the writing is also exceptional. Neither you nor I could rival such writings; Father used to praise her for being uniquely beautiful in handwriting” (12:12). This minor detail in the plot departs from the beauty self-portrait convention in previous tanci, such as the text Destiny of Rebirth, in which the heroine Lijun makes a portrait of herself in feminine attire before changing into a man’s clothing and fleeing from her home. The self-portrait of the cross-dresser would later be discovered as evidence of the disguised heroine’s true identity, prompting inquisitions from her family and lovesick fiancé, and eventually leading to the revelation of her true identity. In Affinity of the Golden Fish, Shurong does not leave a self-portrait of her feminine image, thus displaying an implied determination of never returning to femininity after cross-dressing. Her true identity, rather than being visualized through the convention of a beauty self-portrait, is hidden in her handwriting, suggesting a strong self-association with a literati selfhood.

This association of exceptional talent with the heroine’s character and individuality is recurrently evoked and affirmed by other characters in the story. Later when Lady Shui reveals to Shurong’s fiancé Mei Lanxue that Shurong has not drowned herself but has fled after disguising herself as a man, Lanxue laments Shurong’s suffering and praises her for being 女中智士 (nüzhong zhishi), or an ingenious scholar among women (12:17). He reasons her escape to be a filial act to rescue her endangered parents by emulating the courageous Han dynasty heroine Ti Ying, who petitioned Emperor Wen of the Han to serve as a government slave in place of her father who was accused of bribery, saving her father from cruel corporal punishment. Lanxue, reflecting on Shurong’s talent, hopes that she shall return to him one day: “You are endowed with such talent for great achievements, as well as the wisdom and resourcefulness to escape from the inquiries of common people. . . . . Heaven may not be completely blind to justice; may it not betray this chaste girl in the end” (12:17). Supposing that the minister Zhu Yunping is none other than Shurong herself, he suspects that his fiancée has “cut off her feelings for him because of her high official post and affluent situations” (12:17).

Besides Shurong and Yu’e, quite a few other heroines are depicted as talented writers capable of composing poetry, and they often exchange their writings at family
gatherings. In *juan* 15, at the end of a banquet at Qian Jingchun’s house, seven heroines, summoned by the host Princess Meng’e, each participate in writing a poem on the topic of bidding farewell to give to each other and to express their friendship (15:3). These poems on separation and reunion are respectively from Li Yu’e 李玉娥, Zhu Suying 竺素瑛, Qin Meng’e, Feng Yunluan 馮雲鸞, Zhang Jingshu 章錦書, Luo Xianzhi 羅仙芝, as well as Yan Yingzhu 晏英珠. The participating characters include three exceptional heroines who are adopted by the empress as princesses, daughters of eminent officials, and Yan Yingzhu, daughter of a foreign military general. Bound by family ties, Qin Meng’e, Feng Yunluan, Zhang Jingshu, Luo Xianzhi and Yan Yingshu are all wives in a polygamous marriage with Qian Jingchun. Li Yu’e is the wife of Zhu Yunping, who is the foster son of the Zhu family and elder brother of Zhu Suying.

As Paul S. Ropp observes, by the seventeenth century, “supportive networks of women in the gentry élite regularly exchanged poems and letters, offering each other recognition and encouragement of their literary and artistic talents” (Ropp, “Love, Literacy, and Laments” 108). These literary networks among women “provided many female authors with important psychological support” (108). At the same time, the momentous growth of women’s publications in the seventeenth century and after indicates, according to Ropp, that “female literacy also expanded at a comparable order of magnitude” (108). The above scene of the talented heroines mastering and expressing diverse voices and moods on the subject of惜別 (xibie, bidding farewell), emulating the literati practice of赠人以言 (zengren yiyan, gifting others with words), indicates the prevalent practice of educated women expressing their literary talent and enacting a “literati-feminine” voice.

The text, while reenacting this scene of literary women’s socialization through exchange of poetry, depicts Yan Yingzhu as an extraordinary heroine with outstanding martial talent who aspires to achievements beyond the inner chambers. At the age of fourteen, she has become a leading female general on the battlefield: “Not only is she well-read and brilliant in literature, she is also uniquely talented in martial skills. At a young age, she has met a roaming monk who has taught her the magic of using nine flying daggers” (30). Though captured in the battlefield during a war between the Jin kingdom and Song dynasty, and married to Jingchun upon the emperor’s command, Yingzhu often suffers prejudice and dislike from her sharp-tongued husband who jeers at her for being “a woman from a foreign land,” lacking in benevolence and virtue, and ignorant of “rituals and propriety” (10:21; 15:17). In the above banquet scene, the modest Li Yu’e, when complimented by Qin Meng’e for her exceptionally fine poem, praises Meng’e and Yingzhu for being peerless heroines who “possess superb literary and martial talents” (15:5). This commendation however prompts Yingzhu’s melancholic lament, “My sister could indeed be called a female hero, for she has taken up her sword
and defended the royal clan on a battle steed. How ashamed am I to be mentioned? I have a slightest trace of accomplishment, though having practiced martial skills all my life. Knowing my failings, I am truly incompetent and useless, and not worthy at all” (15:5). When Luo Xianzhi, another wife of Jingchun, comforts Yingzhu for her encounter and marriage to Jingchun, Yingzhu is offended and enraged, because this marriage was initially arranged by her parents and commanded by the emperor, rather than having followed her personal wishes. This dispute evoked by Yingzhu and Xianzhi reflects the author’s approving attitude to women’s martial prowess and military talent. Ambitious characters such as Zhu Yunping, Yan Yingzhu, and Qin Meng’e are illustrated as well-versed in both civil and the military craftsmanship, displaying courage, swordsmanship, strategizing ability, and astute political maneuvering in the military arena. Claiming expertise in martial talents that are often associated with masculinity, these heroines signal the fluid gender boundaries in the text and women’s martial vigor that rivals the capacities of their male counterparts.

**BLOOD WRITING ON FILIAL PIETY**

Women characters, aside from displaying poetic talent, also have taken on other folk forms to express personal yearning and moral ambitions. The text depicts a Princess Lixian臘仙 who composes a blood-written plea to the emperor to rescind a death sentence on her father. Such a passionate act of filial piety, reminiscent of Buddhist traditions of writing blood scriptures, expresses the heroine’s spirit of self-sacrifice and filial piety. Eventually, with the emperor’s commendation, the heroine is rewarded with exceptional authority and moral autonomy. As Patricia Ebrey argues, “filial piety was presented as a political virtue, tied to loyalty to political superiors” up to the emperor (Ebrey, “The Classic of Filial Piety” 64). Yuet Keung Lo proposes that in such situations “family ethics and political success joined in a convenient symbiosis of *realpolitik*. Filial devotion was recognized as a universal virtue, which serves to ‘regulate the family, govern the state, and perfect the world’” (Lo, “Filial Devotion for Women” 73). In *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, filial piety could also serve as a moral purpose and justification for female characters to display their literary talent.

In *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, filial piety becomes a means of women to claim a degree of political power. Two heroines Qin Meng’e and Li Yu’e are appreciated for their outstanding military or literary talent and become princesses. By taking up their filial duties as imperial daughters, they are endowed with more eminence and authority. Another heroine Wen Yingzhen聞英貞 utilizes a daughter’s mandatory three-year filial service after her father’s death to postpone her marriage, displaying an ingenuous understanding that filial devotion must be accomplished through the performance of
rituals in a scholar-official’s family. During a long-lasting battle with the Song troops, the khan was informed by the prince that his mother was deeply worried about the khan and had fallen seriously ill. To fulfill his filial duty, the khan agrees to retreat from the battle, thus allowing the possibility of the two countries forging peace through a marriage alliance between the hostage Yan Yingzhu and the Song dynasty general Qian Jingchun (8:17). Filial piety allows the khan to find a space to compromise between his political ambition and the necessity of retreat and peace. Filial piety in the story is a universal virtue that is enacted in the Song dynasty as well as in foreign lands, and upheld as a major moral parameter by characters of diverse social class. For another example, the emperor’s brother Prince Cheng attempts to assassinate the heir of the throne and frame Zhu Yünping as the culprit. He deploys a swordsman to execute the plan. However, Yünping finds out about the assassin by reading it from a heavenly omen and prevents the tragedy. She then fakes a letter from the swordsman’s mother claiming her serious illness, and sends the letter to him, thus deceiving him into leaving for his hometown. On the way he is stopped by Yünping’s messengers who beguile him and lead him to the minister. He confesses to Yünping about his wrongdoings (11:10). Here, a minor character’s filial piety plays a crucial role for Yünping to discover the assassin and exempt herself from a political calamity.

The aforementioned Princess Lixian, for example, composes a plea to the emperor to rescind a death sentence on her father. The plea was composed in ten-character lines written with her blood. The text represents a unique case of female authorship, endorsed by filial piety:

Bowing my head, kowtowing to Your Highness, I am truly reverent and fearful. Please allow Lixian, a daughter of a culpable official, to explain the circumstances through tears and blood. Because my father, provoked by a small matter, took the liberty of breaking the laws, he harmed the Prince, by sending an assassin, and committed a penultimate offense. Now that the matter was disclosed, thanks to Your Highness’s grace, he was not yet thrown into prison. Like the Han general Xiao He, who was not pardoned when breaking the law, my father should not receive any lighter punishment. Myself his daughter, I have been aware of this circumstance, and feel very blamable. Recalling the sorrowful cases in history, and lessons to learn from, I would like to emulate Ti Ying and rescue my father. If my guilt-ridden father could seek life from death, he would hold deep gratitude for the imperial grace, as if given another life: how would he dare to have any other thoughts? My mother, lacking in wisdom, took to the scheming and shared the offense. As the order from Your Highness goes, she was given the royal sympathy, and can take her own life by hanging. Yet please pity their daughter, me, who at a younger age, lost my birth mother. My stepmother took care of me, raised me with benevolence, and has been the only mother...
to me. Living together for more than a decade, she has loved me as her daughter. I regret my incompetence, and haven’t yet repaid their kindness in the least manner. Now that I see such a mishap in the family, how could I bear to merely watch by the side? Wouldn’t I be the same as the animals? Hence I plead Your Highness, give sympathy, and exempt my parents from death. Please allow me to provide them advice, persuade them to return to the rightful path. Should my parents redress their wrongdoings, and my mother repair her womanly duties, this will all be attributed to the imperial grace. I am keenly aware that my parents carry a crime comparable to mountains. The rules of the court, by themselves, should not be abandoned because of royal blood. Hence please take their daughter me, behead me in place of my parents. If by deserting my own life I could save the two elders, I would be satisfied upon my death. At the end of this letter, I cannot fully express my true feelings and my sadness. I plead that Your Highness would give pity and grace, considering my humble sincerity. Please give great forgiveness, grant my parents another life. From a culpable one who awaits her penalty. (11:15)

Deploying ten-character lines, an informal style of writing often found in oral literature, Lixian pleads with the emperor to spare her parents’ lives so that she can complete filial duties to them and repay her stepmother’s efforts in raising her. She alludes to the ancient example of filial daughter Ti Ying, who rescues her father and bravely volunteers to be a substitute for her culpable parents in taking the death penalty. Further, she proposes that if the emperor might exempt her parents from death, she is willing to assist her mother-in-law to repent for her behavior, mend her moral flaws, and fulfill her 婦職 (fuzhi), or feminine duties. Blood-written compositions may be found in numerous historical records or literary depictions to express grievances against injustice, to express devotion in religious pursuits or self-sacrifice, or to articulate loyalty or political fidelity. Li Xian’s blood composition is reminiscent of the tradition of blood writing in Buddhist practices. Blood writing is also found in some examples as a means of expressing or endorsing filial piety. John Kieschnick notes that a certain sixteenth-century monk Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 practiced blood writing in which he stated that his actions would “repay his parents for their benevolence,” “referring to the merit from copying the scriptures to his parents in the afterlife” (Kieschnick 183). A Tang official Yuan Dexiu 元德秀 commemorated his mother’s death by pricking himself, “using the blood to paint images and copy Buddhist scriptures” (183). The merits of blood writing could be applied to the living as well as the dead, such as a wife praying for the healing and recovery of her husband, or a son praying for the healing of a parent’s illness.

Kieschnick argues that based on the prevalent references to blood writing and the notion of Buddhist merit, “blood writing was not confined by boundaries of gender, religious or social status: monks, nuns, humble laymen and powerful empresses
all found occasion to copy a Buddhist scripture or two in their blood” (183). The reputed late Ming official Huang Daozhou (黃道週, 1585–1646) took to hand-copying 孝經 (Xiaojing, The Classic of Filiality) in his own blood as a way of self-expression. A late Ming scholar Chen Xiyou 陳希友 copied The Classics of Filiality in blood writing as a way to repay his parents’ benevolence (Lu Miaofen 199). A well-known Qing women’s blood-writing practitioner is Lin Jingren 林敬紉, daughter of the famous Qing official Lin Zexu and wife of the official Shen Baozhen (沈葆楨, 1820–1879). In 1856, when Shen was governing Guangxin 廣信, the city was surrounded by Taiping Rebellion troops. Lin Jingren composed an urgent letter in blood to ask for rescue from a military commander who was residing in the adjacent Yushan county. The rescuing army quickly arrived and saved Guangxin City from the siege. Shen Baozhen and Lin Jingren subsequently became very famous. Shen was promoted to be the governor of Jiangxi province. Lin’s famous blood letter not only indicates the urgency of the political situation, but also expresses feminine virtue; her writing is justified as a righteous act of completing her feminine duties and paying service to her husband (see Lin Chongyong 287–308).

Lixian’s blood writing is written in shiziwen, that is, every line is written in ten characters. Each line consists of three consecutive segments, in three, three, and four characters. This is a form of vernacular writing that can be traced to the Ming dynasty, when writing in such ten-character lines with a structure of three-three-four are called zan shizi (making ten characters). Such syntactical structures may be found not only in tanci and 鼓詞 (guci, drum songs), but also in other vernacular genres, including late Ming and early Qing 宝卷 (baojuan, precious scrolls), Qing dynasty 善書 (shanshu, morality books), and 鴞詩 (luanshi, opera songs) (see Ye Dejun). The style of ten-character lines may be found in other parts of this tanci. In depicting the battle scene between the general Mei Lanxue and the armies led by the king of the northern Chanyu kingdom, the narrator also takes up the ten-character lines to quicken the pace of the storytelling: “How trimmed and orderly do the troops look? Allow me to put together ten-character lines and take up a new tune” (8:19).

The folk genre of ten-character lines allows Lixian a modest writing medium to express herself and articulate her filial passions in a feminine voice. The emperor, who is the addressee of this letter, is so effectively moved by Lixian’s writing that he commutes the death sentence on Lixian’s parents, and allows her to oversee the moral regulation and transformation of her stepmother’s behavior. As a result of her writing, Lixian empowers herself as a filial daughter and further gains endorsement from the emperor who arranges for her to marry the eminent official Mei Lanxue, as her parents originally had hoped. She is also rewarded by the emperor the title 孝義王妃 (Xiaoyi Wangfei), or Princess of Filiality and Integrity. Her writing, though distinctively written in a feminine voice and in a minor literary form, is a self-claimed 表 (biao) to the
emperor. Jane Geaney argues that *biao*, or “speech and action on display” are “those of commoners or would be *junzi* or gentlemen, not superiors, and their purpose is to reveal one’s character to superiors” (Geaney 183). By deploying filial piety as a righteous cause for her extraordinary action, Lixian articulates her thoughts and strategically puts herself on display in front of the emperor, and in return, gains the domestic authority and moral autonomy as a regulator of her shrewd and imperious stepmother and her imprudent father.

**BEYOND THE GENTRY: TALENTED MINOR HEROINES**

Aside from the leading heroines who are talented women themselves, minor female characters both from the gentry class and lower upbringings have displayed literary or artistic talents in the story. Women characters’ acts of writing receive moral endorsement because of their virtuous nature or righteous purposes, whether to rescue parents or to seek alleviation of punishment on husbands. Mrs. Shui, the wife of the vicious Minister Feng Ruojin, also demonstrates remarkable talent composing a memorial addressed to the emperor pleading for her guilty husband to be summoned back to the capital city after being expelled for many years. The minister Zhu Yunping agrees to present this memorial for her to the emperor; the latter is amazed by her writing and praises her for being “a woman of virtue and talent” (16:6). Shui Shi’s letter begins by alluding to the fact that since ancient times people have been governed by the emperors’ benevolence and their filial devotion to the emperor, and therefore should not ask for exceptional grace beyond the law. She proceeds to articulate her husband’s sincere wish to repent for his wrongdoing, confesses the difficulty to live in poverty on her own with a very young child, and appeals for the emperor’s pity and sympathy. She says,

> Because I stayed with the family and made a meager living with a young son, we are deserted and helpless. Neither do we have strong and powerful relatives to rely on, nor do we have any servants at the house. All alone by ourselves, we live in true grief and misery. Your Highness is benevolent and forgiving. I bow to plead that you might perceive our bitter situations, broadly give pity and grace, and exempt my husband from further punishment. If he can return home alive, and our family can reunite, we shall consider our lives as being given by Your Highness, and strive to repay your tremendous kindness in this life and future generations. (16:6)

Moved by Shui Shi’s writing, the emperor pardons Feng and allows him to return to reunite with his family. In composing this memorial, Shui Shi tactically takes on the
position of a filial subject of the emperor, a 子民 (zimin, child civilian), seeking to be reunited with her husband. By enacting the discourse of filial piety, she positions the emperor as 君父 (junfu) or emperor-father of the subordinate sons and daughters, rationalizes to gain his pity, and reiterates her devotion and subordination. Previously, Shui Shi succeeds in moving Zhu Yunping with her virtuous character and makes Zhu agree to assist her in presenting her memorial to the emperor. Although a minor character, Shui Shi displays how feminine virtue and talent could be applied to grant satisfaction of personal desires and to gain endorsement from men or even the emperor himself.

Representations of women’s literary and artistic talents comprise rich diversity well beyond traditional learnings of literature and art. Quite a few women are brilliant in music. In juan 16, at a family gathering, five heroines play zithers together. The narrator describes this extraordinary scene as follows:

The five zithers reverberate in the decorated hall, a tune of “Geese Descend on a Sandbank” resonates long last. When they play, the tune is fine and serene, the notes elegant. When they play, the rhythms alternate between high and low, rapid and leisurely, sounding smooth and echoing. Hearing the melodies, the white cranes in the sky soar and dance to the tunes. Hearing the melodies, the flowers extend and shake their branches to the beat. When the melody is completed, they all halt, leaving the audience clear-minded and elevated in spirit. (16:16)

Not only are these heroines talented in playing musical instruments, even maidens and house servants are well-trained in music or endowed with artistic talent. Luo Linxiang 骆林香, a maid of Shui Shi, is particularly adept at playing the flute (17:11). Instructed by Princess Meng’e herself, Linxiang is praised for “an exceptional elegance in musical notes and melodies” (17:11). Minor characters also are capable of changing their own fate by displaying their literary or artistic talent. Once, the disguised minister Yunping takes a stroll in her garden and overhears live-in singsong girl Yu Liniang lamenting her fate through singing:

Deeply confined in the minister’s mansion for an endlessly long time,  
In vain I lament my ill fate and bear the sadness.  
This rouged face has not known the caress of the spring breeze,  
My dark hair becomes frosted in the mirror as my sorrows grow. (18:14)

Hearing the singsong girl’s lament, Yunping is deeply moved and decides to allow all the grown-up singsong girls in the house to leave and return to their parents or relatives. Likewise, in juan 16, Yunping’s house servant Wang Ming selects four singsong girls to perform at the birthday banquet of Minister Zhu, Yunping’s foster father. It turns
out that the youngest girl, Shunzhen 順珍, who is particularly beautiful and adept at singing, is a granddaughter of Yunping’s teacher Mr. Yang. In her childhood, Shunzhen had been abducted while attending a Lantern Festival with her family. Upon this discovery, Yunping takes in the six-year-old Shunzhen as an adopted daughter. Other distinctively cultured minor characters include two royal maidens who the emperor gives to Yunping as concubines. Not willing to expose her identity, the disguised Yunping accepts the two maidens, but later dispatches each of them to marry their previously betrothed fiancés (13:17). After their marriages, both maidens become wives of civil officials and pay a visit back to Yunping to thank the minister. One brings a gift of a 焦尾琴 (jiaoweiqin, burnt-tail zither), a family treasure that belonged to the legendary Cai Yi of the Eastern Han, to thank the minister for allowing her to reunite with her fiancé. The other maiden presents a Han dynasty incense burner that has been passed down in her family. Despite their humble status, both heroines display outstanding knowledge in art and culture.

As a marginal heroine, a servant-maid and singsong girl in tanci rarely receives personal endorsement, for she mostly serves as a comic relief, a substitute for the heroine in marriage, or a personal (often disguised) confidante on the disguised heroine’s journey. In some cases, a servingmaid who is prone to jealousy or of low moral standing could create an aggravated situation for the hero or heroine. Or, a maid could act as a messenger between the heroine and her admirer, and mediate the subtle exchange of messages in and out of the inner chambers. Although servingmaids are evidently of low social status, they do have more physical mobility in the domestic space in comparison with the relatively more cloistered women who are instructed to observe Confucian gender rules. The Red Maid (Hongniang) in the Romance of the West Chamber acts as a go-between for the lovesick Zhang Sheng and her mistress Cui Yingying, and makes it possible for the two to develop a covert relationship; ultimately, as a reward for her loyalty, she becomes the hero’s concubine. Minor women characters may be given temporary importance to highlight the leading heroine’s integrity or chastity, create dramatic conflict, provide insight to the characters’ mental activities, facilitate contact between characters of diverse social castes, allow the intervention of chance and surprise in plot development, or act as an agent to unravel the disguised truth. In Destiny of Rebirth, it is the palace maidens who unravel Lijun’s bound feet and expose Lijun’s femininity. Yet in Ming Qing tanci novels, the servingmaids are often created to enrich the system of narrative motifs that foreshadow leading characters’ mandates or impending dramatic conflicts, or to mediate ideological stances of the text or authorial narrator. These maidens are invariably limited as minor roles and correspond to marginalized women confined to humble lower status.

Affinity of the Golden Fish enriches these narrative conventions by characterizing a group of supporting heroines whose talent allows them to transcend the hierarchical
social strata and gives them a certain degree of power to express personal desire. Rather than casting female talent as an exclusive phenomenon among governing-class women, the text indicates a broad and vigorous scene of accomplished heroines of lower upbringings taking to literary and artistic practices. These adept and resourceful maids, singsong girls, and concubines recall what Dorothy Ko calls "women as everyday strategists" in the Ming and Qing, and how social reality could have "involved a much more complicated process of accommodation, negotiation, subversion and collusion" (Ko, "Pursuing Talent and Virtue" 14). Ko observes that "in real life, the inner-outer boundary was constantly being trespassed or redrawn" (14). Servant-maids embody the social class of a well-born young lady with a cultured family. Yet the talented servant-maids in Affinity of the Golden Fish embody a feminine identity that not only observes or reinforces the Confucian doctrine of separate spheres, but also has intermittent power to go between and mediate communications among characters in these spheres.

The text prompts a reconsideration of the relationship between female talent and class represented in late imperial literature, and how such relationships redefine literary imagination of feminine subjectivity. Susan Naider Lanser notes that narrative technique is "not simply a product of ideology but an ideology itself," and that narrative voice "embodies the social, economic, and literary conditions under which it has been produced" (Lanser, Fictions of Authority 5). Resonating with the text's redefinition of female beyond the governing gentry class, Affinity of the Golden Fish portrays literary activities as part of women's everyday lives. For example, literary drinking games mobilize women in diverse creations in genres including poetry, tanci, riddles, jokes, and anecdotal stories as fitting to each character's family background and personal interest. Associations of drinking and women's literary activities are prevalent in Ming Qing literature. The reputed Qing playwright Wu Zao composed the play 喬影 (Qiaoying, Image in Disguise), in which the protagonist Xie Xucai disguises herself as a man and makes a self-portrait. Facing her painted image as a man, she reads the classical work 郎騷 (Lisao, Encountering Sorrows). The theatrical character Xie Xucai, through enacting the role of the drinking poet, expresses her wish to transcend gender boundaries as a literary author as well as her wish for a purported appropriation of the voice of a literatus.

An illustrative scene of women participating in literary drinking games can be found in juan 18 of Affinity of the Golden Fish. In this scene, the wives of Qian Jingchun gathered together at a banquet with Zou Yunping, "his" wife Li Yu'e, and sister Zou Suying. For entertainment, Jingchun proposes a rather easy wine-drinking game, with the one who fails required to tell a story or compose a poem: "The player needs to throw out three dice all at once. If one is red, the player takes a cup of wine. If there are two red dice, the player takes two cups of wine. If all three are red, the player tells a joke, an anecdote, a riddle, or makes a poem, as he likes. Afterwards, all shall accompany
the player and have a cup of wine” (18:4). Princess Shengping tells an anecdote of 黃粱一夢 (Huangliang yimeng, a golden millet dream) about the Daoist Lu Dongbin, who dreams of a life of fortune and fame, and wakes up to the realization of the illusory nature of the human world. Lady Luo offers a poetry riddle. Lady Yan from the northern Chanyu kingdom does not have as much learning, and hence tells a joke. As for the cross-dressed Yunping, “his” sister Suying, and “his” wife Yu’e, they take the theme of chrysanthemum and each compose a poem. Each character’s story or poem reflects her birth and family learning, personal temperament, and preference, as well as lifelong pursuits or ambitions. The cross-dressed Yunping decides to play 歡樂令 (Huanle ling, The Joy Drinking Game) with “his” wife Li Yu’e as a couple and composes the following poems:

**PLANTING THE CHRYSANTHEMUM FLOWERS**

The high time of autumn is ideal for seeing the flowers  
I plant the flowers at this time as a habit of planning  
Caring for the flowers so that they have robust branches to brave frost and snow  
And have fine airs for appreciation.

**ON CHRYSANTHEMUM FLOWERS**

When writing about the chrysanthemum garden, there are some exceptional flowers.  
Putting down my brush at times, I was ridden with thoughts.  
My eyes are filled with the scenery of autumn, all fully blooming,  
Several bushes of beautiful blossoms already urge me to write them down in poems.

**FACING THE CHRYSANTHEMUM FLOWERS**

Like smoke, condensed dew, and densely laid out clouds;  
The flowers display different hues of whiteness and yellow layer by layer.  
Taking up the brush, I would like to admire the flowers with the secluded ones,  
Pouring a cup of wine, I shall give a toast to this flower of longevity. (18:8)

The chrysanthemum flower, the fourth “gentleman of flowers,” is favored in dynastic poetry and painting, symbolizing excellence, integrity, longevity, or the ideal of a life in seclusion. In the Ming dynasty, the chrysanthemum was a special subject of painting for literati scholars (Goody 364). It is a flower of exceptional disposition. The painter of this flower should be one who perceives and cherishes a conception of the flower in a sincere and wholesome way. The above textual example of Yunping and Yu’e sharing the rhyme and subject in composing poems invites a close reading beyond the surface implications of the lines. In her article “Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China,”
Maureen Robertson observes that female writers’ acts of ventriloquism in appropriating a male literary mode allow them to express their own concerns. Here, the heroine Yunping appropriates this poetic convention to express a literati ideal of selfhood, which reinforces her masculine veneer. Also, Paul S. Ropp suggests, “the increased female literacy in the Qing . . . inspired the development of intellectual and emotional intimacy, especially between gentry husbands and wives” (Ropp, “Love, Literacy, and Laments” 109). In Sun Deying’s fictional reconfiguration, the couple’s participation in the poetry writing game perfects their mock union and displays the “intellectual and spiritual companionship” of husband and wife (109). Female literacy is endorsed not only through the talented wife’s poetic works, but also through the cross-dresser’s self-fashioning as a Confucian scholar by performing poetic “transvestism” (Huang, Negotiating Masculinities).

In comparison with these rather literary outputs from the drinking games, other characters produce lively stories, riddles, or jokes. Yan Yingzhu, who was born in the northern Mongolian region and is a former general, rather than composing a poem, tells a joke:

A young man liked wandering and did not favor reading. His enraged father locked him up in a room. He ordered the servants to send in food and water for the son, and asked the son to focus his eyes on the books, and contemplate the scrolls carefully. The father thought that if the son took to reading with such dedication, he would achieve new understanding. Three days later, the father came to check on the son’s work. The son answered, “Thanks to my father’s ingenuous instructions, I find that reading is indeed beneficial. I only spent three days reading and have already understood a lot.” The overjoyed father asked, “What did you discover?” The son, also quite pleased, said, “I have often thought that these books were handwritten by brushes. After studying them for three days, I found out that each page of the books was actually made by printing boards.” (18:4)

The incorrigibly ignorant son could be read as ridicule of some men’s lack of learning. Or, the joke might be a satire against unperceptive readers who may “read” the text, and yet have no interpretive potency to go beyond the surface. The joke, as part of the wine-drinking game, offers a window for readers to ponder the metatextual nuances between the joke as an embedded text and the novel. It is impossible to decipher whether the laughably ignorant male “reader” in the joke refracts authorial anxieties about crude readers. And yet, the joke, appreciated by a group of learned heroines, casts an ironic overtone upon the customary perception of learning and cultural attainment that are inscribed as parts of Confucian masculine identities.
This scene recalls representations of wine-drinking games enjoyed by heroines of diverse social class in various dynastic texts. Cao Xueqin’s eminent novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* provides rich examples of women playing drinking games together, using diverse *jiuling* (wine-drinking rules). Drinking becomes a powerful means of textual transaction. The occasion of drinking facilitates the spreading of rumors through casual chatting. It may enable a minor character to transcend his or her class or social status temporarily and express grievance or insurgence, as in the scene “焦大醉罵” (“Jiaoda zuima,” “The drunk servant Jiao Da curses others”), a demonstrative narrative strategy called 醉人文法 (*zuiren wenfa*, writing through the drunken character). That is to say, when the intoxicated character enacts the role of a commentator, he or she foreshadows the plot development. The most recognized episode about women and literary drinking games take place at the celebration of Baoyu’s birthday, when the characters play the drinking game of 占花名兒 (*zhan huaming er*, “Guessing the Names of the Flowers”). On each drinking straw there is an image of a flower and a resonating line from a Tang or Song poem. Both the flower and the poetic line depict the character’s personality and presage her fate. Aside from governing-class women, lower-class women also play literary drinking games. When a singsong girl Yun’er participates in a drinking game with Xue Pan, Feng Ziyi, Feng Ziying, and Baoyu, she takes up the game of “女兒悲” (“nü’er bei,” “The Girl’s Sorrows”) to express the feelings and emotions of the courtesans.

Women’s literary experiments with *jiuling* or drinking games are well illustrated in nineteenth-century fictional works, such as *Flowers in the Mirror*, 花月痕 (*Huayuehen*, Traces of Flowers and the Moon), 青樓夢 (*Qingloumeng*, The Dream in the Green Bower), and *A Tanci Work to Please My Mother-In-Law*. Women’s drinking games in these novels engage roleplaying and creations such as linked verses, rhyme-redoubling, allusions, puns, riddles, and jokes, which in turn facilitate double entendre, foreshadowing, empathetic identification, embedded narratives, or character focalization. Games with drinking cards frequently serve as storytelling ploys with which players blend and combine characters, locations, and actions to create new tales. Often, characters’ compositions or storytelling at the games are regulated by designated methods of wine consuming. Wine-drinking games in the novels could evoke narrative urgency, intercede the plot with flirtation or suspense, or transform the characters into performative “subjects” who are endowed with a degree of writerly agency. In the above novels, specifically, drinking games reflect women’s shared cultural interest with men, endorse women’s learnedness and artistic creativity, and allow heroines means of self-representation. Whereas drinking games invented by literati provided the cultured and the common with shared joy, women’s drinking games invite a situated study on gender, talent, and play.
Li Ruzhen’s *Flowers in the Mirror*, an illustrative “novel of erudition,” reconfigures learned women’s drinking games and projects a vision of feminine literary utopia. The text’s depiction of one hundred talented women playing drinking games at their gathering could be recontextualized in light of educated women’s culture and the proliferation of women’s poetry clubs and literary networks since the late Ming. The play of the drinking games allowed women to imitate the voices of the literati, articulate criticism on historical figures, endorse loyalty and filial piety, cast mockeries of the civil service exam, state disapprovals of historians and critics, or applaud deserving and less known scholars. Drinking games draw attention to the ways in which feminine voices have been constructed by men at a time of educated women’s rising social visibility. The heroines’ drinking games provide examples for scrutinizing the discursivity of the “feminine voice,” the differences underlying the position of the female speaking subject, and authorial maneuvering of the voice in relations with dominant social, political, and gender ideologies. Insisting on playing the elegant games, rather than the secular games, the heroines’ deployments of allusions, puns, and riddles are purportedly selected from the classic texts for audiences in the inner chambers. The heroines insisted upon their writings’ dedication to the instructions of learning, as distinguished from writings in the lowly sensational genres. Their compositions expressed an anxiety about rectifying the moral purpose of their products, and the editing and circulation of writings beyond the inner chambers.

Women’s drinking games in “talent and beauty” novels reconfigure gendered play in the exchanges of literati and courtesans. In two male-authored novels, *Traces of Flowers and the Moon* and *The Dream in the Green Bower*, drinking games between literati and courtesan heroines in both texts serve as means for the characters to present talent and articulate a shared epochal melancholia about the declination of a literati culture. Different from and yet resonant with Li’s elite heroines, courtesans are depicted as a community of cultured players with exceptional knowledge and artistic dexterities. Courtesans’ drinking games, which broadly encompass archaic ballads, musical performances, oral-vernacular speech, and even political events and current affairs, could carry rich implications of imminent social changes in the form of traditional entertainment (also see Yeh 111, 165–66).

In *Affinity of the Golden Fish* and the late nineteenth-century work *A Tací Work to Please My Mother-In-Law* by 橘道人 (Ju Daoren), women’s literary drinking games address a feminine literary community built on interfamilial relations and networks. Whereas women’s drinking games in male-authored texts construct diverse literati imaginations of femininity through multifarious images of learned women or talented courtesans, women-authored fictional works depict characters’ strategic appropriation of poetry, drama, jokes, and vernacular traditions in drinking games to display talent and humor, to endorse filial piety or chastity, to enhance relationships in a
polygamous family, or to express heroines’ aspirations in love, marriage, and writing. Women’s drinking games reflect heroines as players who actively engage in negotiations with diverse tastes, class, and moral aesthetics of femininity, and contribute to shared pleasures of reading/playing among these novels’ targeted audience, that is, female readers in the inner chambers. The function of women’s literary drinking games in these texts and many more fictional works of this time transcends that of a mere narrative device, or that of a rhetoric mode of *mise en abyme* in the narratological sense. Rather, these games provide a reflexivity of gendered discourses about femininity, writing, and women’s increased visibility in their participations in and responses to social changes the nineteenth century.

**WOMEN’S ARTISTIC TALENT AND THE VERNACULAR CULTURE**

Aside from the literary drinking games, in *Affinity of the Golden Fish*, women characters’ artistic talent is demonstrated in their expertise in poetry, painting, music, and even vernacular storytelling. It is illustrated in the book that heroines frequently play chess, one of the four arts for literati scholars (i.e., zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting). Yunping plays chess with one of her young nieces. Another niece gains the name of “female scholar” for expressing interest in a set of Japanese *igo* (*weiqi*), a foreign tributary item that the emperor has gifted to Yunping (20:21). Li Xiaorong observes in her study of new cultural ideals of femininity in Ming and Qing periods, “the emphasis on women’s learning and artistic talent was a major trend in the rewriting of traditional womanhood” (Li Xiaorong, *Women’s Poetry of Late Imperial China* 74). This nascent ideal of “women of letters” was “instrumental in Ming-Qing poets’ transformation of boudoir poetics”; women’s engagement in poetic and artistic activities contributes crucially to their self-representations (74). Li emphasizes how “the cultural ideals and expressions developed in literati self-cultivation influenced women’s self-perceptions and created an idealization of their lived space” (74). Building on Li’s analysis, this study of Sun’s *tanci* shows that women characters’ self-cultivation and display of literary and artistic talent take on a rather expansive dimension that transforms boudoir poetics and the ideal of womanhood affiliated with it, and reach to competent and extraordinary heroines beyond the governing class, such as opera performers, storytellers, servingmaids, and singsong girls. The text reenvisions women’s learning beyond the four arts of traditional scholars, and endows its heroines with rare assets such as martial talent, divinatory skills, or even the competence to decipher foreign languages. The *tanci*’s rewriting of female talent can be viewed as a vernacular imagination of feminine subjectivity.
Endorsement of women’s exceptional knowledge and learning could be found in embedded narratives and subplots. There are frequent depictions of women celebrating marriage, births of children, or parents’ birthdays by means of summoning female theatrical performance. Among these examples, there are two descriptions of women’s tanci performance that provide intertextual illustrations of heroines who cross-dress as men, accomplish outstanding careers as officials and scholars, and finally return to their feminine identities and reunite with their fiancés in marriage. In juan 16, at a birthday banquet for Minister Zhu, Yunping’s father-in-law, a house servant summons three young singsong girls to give a performance of a tanci titled 雙仙會 (Shuangxian hui, Meeting of Two Immortals). In this embedded tale, during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty, a literati official’s daughter Huang Caixian 黃彩仙, who is already betrothed to a young scholar, flees from her home to escape a forced marriage with her cousin. On her journey, Caixian encounters an imperial minister who adopts Caixian as his son and takes her to the capital city. It happens that the Korean kingdom sends an envoy requesting the Tang court to read and identify the new name of the Korean king. If no one knows the king’s name, Korea shall wage a war against the country. Whereas no civil or martial officials can read the inscriptions on the royal seals, Huang Caixian is the only one who knows the Korean language and identifies the king’s title. Upon the emperor’s command, she attends the civil service exam in the following year and becomes a first scholar (16:21). When the Korean kingdom invades the nation, Caixian ventures to lead the armies to fight the enemy, secures the border, and later is promoted to be minister of the rites, at the core of the administrative organization that controls the imperial education system. Whereas this embedded tanci tale ends with Caixian’s refeminization and marriage with her fiancé, the heroine in the singsong girls’ tale is doubtlessly a narrative miniature of the disguised heroine Zhu Yunping in her literary talent and martial powers.

Women’s depictions of female-performed tanci, as in the earlier Linked Rings of Jade, and in this nineteenth-century work by Sun Deying, pose an affirmative attitude toward lower-class women’s artistic talent and expertise in mastering vernacular performances, such as 女彈詞 (nü tanci, female tanci storytelling) and 女戲 (nüxi, women-performed opera). In juan 20 of Affinity of the Golden Fish, at a family banquet, Qin Meng’e observes that tanci, rather than oblique poetry or singing and dancing, is particularly pleasant to hear, fresh in subject, and appealing to the audience’s taste. Recalling the previous tanci Meeting of Two Immortals, she summons the two singsong girls again who perform another work 拾金釵 (Shi jinchai, A Golden Hairpin), which is a scholar-beauty romance ending in a polygamous marriage. Meng’e proposes to keep at her house a group of female entertainers who are adept at playing the pipa instrument, and asks them to practice singing dozens of famous tanci works. Later, Luo Xianzhi, at a gathering with female relatives, observes, “Beginning with the tanci singing at Minister Zhu’s house, everyone takes to listening to tanci storytelling for
leisure and entertainment. Even refined dances and fresh-tuned songs lose their popularity; every official’s house hosts a few storytellers” (20:3). Earlier in the text, at occasions of marriage and childbirth, the Qian family summons a female opera troupe to perform at their house. These textual details indicate the popularity of lower-class women’s vernacular performances for gentry female audiences.

These two embedded tanci tales exemplify the device of a “story within a story,” and allow shifted and interactive narrative points of view, with the exposure of complex and different narrative levels. In both scenarios of tanci performances, and most prominently in the first scene, the female members of the Qian family house intervene frequently, raise questions about the challenges of Caixian to travel in disguise, the probability of the heroine’s mock union with a sister, the irony of the heroine’s father’s inability to recognize his own daughter when overseeing the civil exam, as well as Caixian’s bravery and ingenuity in keeping her true femininity a secret. The text here is constructed by paralleled narrative frames, including the fictional heroines questioning tanci singers regarding the plausibility of story, unveiling a possible reflexivity on the part of the authorial narrator, and contemplating and responding to possible inquiries from her implied readers about her plot choices and arrangements. This important textual moment of reflexivity recalls the popularity of vernacular literature among elite audiences. As Richard J. Smith observes, despite the stylistic differences and gaps, popular vernacular literature “tended to reflect elite values” like orthodox classic literature, and “the elite enjoyed certain types of popular literature (such as novels) as much as, if not more than, the less privileged masses” (Smith 307). In light of content and attractiveness, “vernacular literature provides us with a valuable perspective on life in late imperial China” (307). The text’s endorsement of the heroine’s ability goes far beyond connoisseurship of feminine literary talent. Yunping’s aptitude brings her a social position and political power in governing the state, even overseeing and instructing the newly enthroned young emperor. In juan 17, Yunping composes a poem on her role in steering the education system and selecting the officials for the court:

In the chambers the scholars’ knowledge is exceptional from this generation;  
In front of the Minister’s gate, numerous disciples receive instruction.  
During the ten years of her service, talented officials fill in the court,  
All of them are recommended and promoted by your humble minister, myself. (17:1)

Like Meng Lijun in Destiny of Rebirth and Zhao Xiangxian 趙湘仙 in A Tale of Vacuity, the disguised heroines exhibit their literary talent by passing the civil exam and becoming court officials themselves, but also take the position of exam officials in selecting civil talents for the court. In juan 18, Yunping reflects on her achievement in the position of prime minister after living a life in disguise for eight years:
All my ambitions and wishes have come true, success and fame are now attained. Having redressed the name of my wronged parents, and redeemed them from suffering, I also eliminated the lascivious and dishonest officials, and cleansed the palace. Governing balance in measurement of state affairs, I promote benevolence in administration and am applauded by people of the nation; in the minister’s headquarters, I harmonize relations at the court and assist the revered and wise emperor. . . . In front of my mansion, my disciples amass like hill mounds; all subordinate officials bow and follow my commands. (18:16)

Contemplating her fortune, she exclaims, “Ah, I am no more than a frail woman in the fragrant chambers, but have made such an astonishing accomplishment!” Sensing the risk of having her true identity exposed, Yunping plans to leave her position for life as a recluse. Yet she worries that “the Emperor has displayed the intention of making me assist the young heir. I have received such royal grace and favor, because I have been considered as an equivalent of the famous Minister Yi Yin of the Zhou dynasty, who mentored and instructed the young heir of the throne” (18:17). Deemed as a sage-minister for the court like the legendary Yi Yin, Yunping is entrusted by the emperor with authority to manage the daily operations of the royal bureaucracy and to rise up to the challenge of political emergencies of the nation.

Whereas the disguised Yunping obtains success in the male-centered civil exam, the text, in an embedded tale, mentions 女試 (nüshi), or “women’s exam,” as a way for women to receive endorsement for their talents. In the last juan, upon Meng’s request, two singers perform a new tanci story called 英奇傳 (Yingqi zhuan, “A Story of the Heroic and Extraordinary”), set during the reign of Emperor Yuan of the Jin dynasty. This short story recounts the tale of an official’s daughter who is abducted and forced to marry a minister’s son. She manages to escape, and later is adopted by a minister as his daughter. It happens that the empress holds a “women’s exam” in order to select female scholars to instruct the princesses in learning. The heroine attends the exam with her foster parents’ encouragement and becomes the first female scholar. Meanwhile, her fiancé passes the civil exam and becomes a first scholar. The two are appointed to appease a military revolt, and they are triumphant on the battlefields. In the end the couple are reunited in a polygamous marriage. This embedded tanci tale is unique in that it recalls the ancient practice of “women’s exam,” which was an education system parallel to the civil exam, and allowed women to receive recognition and officialdom for their talent regardless of their status and family upbringing. Hence the talented heroine, who does not disguise herself, still is granted the access to achieve personal aspirations and is not confronted with the lot of refeminization as in the plot of Affinity of the Golden Fish. This subplot highlights Sun Deying’s tanci as an exemplar of framed narratives, as the authorial narrator, through these embedded
and incredibly detailed *tanci* tales, contemplates the ironically different narrative possibilities in the singsong girls' inventive *tanci*, and her own much grimmer, intricate, and realistic plot.

**CONCLUSIONS**

In the context of women's *tanci* fiction, shifting paradigms of talent and feminine subjectivity invite scrutinization of gender relations and ideologies embedded in the social and cultural norms of dynastic China. Marie Florine Bruneau incisively notes, “the history of women within patriarchy can be viewed as the history of women's opposition, tactical struggles and adaptive devices” (Bruneau 157). The history of women, rather than one of victimization or a history to be considered in isolation, is “the history of the dynamics of strategies of control on the part of the dominant power and of tactics of survival, negotiation, accommodation, opposition or self-affirmation on the part of women” (157). Women's history, Bruneau suggests, is a history “of a relation of power opposing blocks of power on a horizontal axis” (157). Sun Deying's textual ramifications of female talent as fashioned in the conventions of literati feminine subjectivity and beyond, as this chapter has illustrated, gesture toward a creative space for women's self-expression of literary and artistic talent. On the one hand, the talented Yunping's emulation and reconfiguration of the talented Confucian scholar allows a kind of literary transvestism, a disguise that allows her to garner administrative authority and power at the court and in selecting civil officers. This successful transvestism even allows Yunping to dispel suspicions of her act of cross-dressing, and reinforces her masqueraded identity as an erudite scholar, drawing on the normative associations of literati learning and Confucian masculine identity.

The text transfigures the normative premises of the gentry class underlying the definitions of literary talent by portraying minor heroines, such as servingmaids, concubines, and singsong girls, whose intellect, aptitude, and artistic competency not only mirror or strengthen the talents of the leading heroines or provide plot enrichment, but also indicate ordinary heroines' increased access to self-articulation and self-expression in a late imperial vernacular community. The text's exceedingly intricate narrative frames, from time to time, allow such minor female characters to take on temporary authorial positions in sharing their own voices, whether through literary drinking games, poetic songs, or entailed *tanci* stories. This textual hybridity indicates active authorial experiments in narrative techniques, allowing polyphonic interventions in the flow of the story, engaging interplay between diverse speaking subjects and voices across genres, and indicating recurring moments of authorial deliberations of possibilities on plot development and narrative closure. On the other hand, textual
dissonance, hybridity, polarity, and stylistic gradience may be characteristics of a rising vernacular trend of reinterpreting feminine talent through less canonical genres, with *tanci* being a crucial artistic form of such nature.

The text’s reconfiguration of the literati feminine voice through vernacular narratives recalls narratological analysis of sociopolitical discourses’ appropriation of “voice” to mobilize it as a signifier for “resisting oppressive power structures” (Rosen 94). Susan Lanser observes that “the fictional practice of minor-character elaboration” could illustrate women writers’ usage of “voice” as “a crucial signifier for female authority and autonomy” (Lanser, *Fictions of Authority* 272). Lanser writes that when diverse undertakings to “voice” merge “in what Mikhail Bakhtin has called a ‘sociological poetics,’ it becomes possible to see narrative technique not simply as a product of ideology but as ideology itself” (5). Jeremy Rosen, in response to Lanser’s observation, further points out the nuanced and important distinction between the authorial construction of the minor characters’ voices, and the characters’ voices of their own, the latter representing a more resolute degree of fictional autonomy not entirely subjected to authorial maneuver and control. In light of *Affinity of the Golden Fish* and *tanci* fiction by women in general, “voice” remains a richly mobile and fluid textual construct that constantly negotiates with and often shifts the permeable boundaries between hierarchical norms of gender roles, class and familial background, power, and authority. Ultimately, at the focal point of Sun Deying’s tale rests the shared and much more universal concern of women writers about “how to escape the female condition,” as Idema and Grant put it, “the way in which a woman can escape her female condition with all its attendant hardships, and join the world of men” (Idema and Grant 562). The comparably humble status of *tanci* fiction paradoxically allowed women authors to appropriate this narrative form and develop a distinctive voice of their own without explicitly challenging the established norms. Rather, Sun’s text demonstrates that voices from gender-affiliated speaking positions could be a discursive strategy for authorial self-endorsement and reclamation of authority, for using ventriloquism to re-fashion the literati-feminine voice through fictional narratives, for giving voices to the marginal and disempowered minor heroines, and thereafter shifting the center of fictional authority.