CONCLUSION

Through explorations of five voluminous and less studied works by reputed women authors of the Qing dynasty, this book has endeavored to develop current studies of women’s written tanci, not by projecting a unified vision of a feminine literary tradition, but rather by inviting a situated, in-depth, and extended understanding of women’s innovation of orthodox gender roles beyond the saturated plotline of cross-dressing in an enormous and significant corpus of early modern vernacular narratives. The chapters of this book contribute to current scholarship on Qing vernacular narratives, Chinese women’s writings, and early modern fictional and cultural models of global protofeminist tendencies in the following aspects.

Chapter 1 on Zhu Suxian’s Linked Rings of Jade reconsiders the mechanism of the Confucian family relations by focusing feminine authority and women’s self-realization through the governance and reconfiguration of the domestic sphere. As Zhu’s tanci illuminates, virtuous and resourceful heroines garner feminine authority by transforming their normative social and familial roles as discursive locations of subjective formation. Zhu’s work exemplifies a textual model of women’s self-configuration by reinforcing feminine moral and intellectual virtues within the norms of Confucian social and familial relations. Simultaneously, the text’s innovative reclamation of vernacular literacy through embedded theatrical modes of expression in written tanci allows the author to reach blended popular audiences beyond gentry class readers and illustrates multifarious modes of moral expressions, as well as gender valences and dynamism.

Chapter 2 on Li Guiyu’s Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers, a much-needed study of early modern Chinese women’s homoeroticism, illustrates how female same-sex bonds reconfigure heterosexual and often polygamous marriage institutions, expand the models of
Illustrations of women’s homoerotic sentiments in *Destiny of Rebirth* and *Linked Rings of Jade* place more emphasis on the characters’ spiritual love and almost always end with a return to orthodox conjugal relations. Li’s text departs from this established convention in *tanci* in the following aspects. First, at the center of the plot is the same-sex relation between two women who are both disguised as men. This camouflage of both characters’ sexualities allows the heroines the same opportunities to explore life possibilities as men’s equals and maintain homoerotic bonds under the disguise of “brotherhood.” Second, the text’s illuminations of female same-sex love transform the early modern narrative model of *qing*, and mobilize dialectic interchanges of spiritual love and sexual desire in depicting women’s homoerotic bonds. Manifest representations of enthused sexual attraction between the heroines throughout the novel display a relatively open-minded authorial stance in endorsing a women-oriented love that encompasses emotional intimacies and sexual attractions. Third, as Li’s text illustrates, female same-sex bonds interpolate the polygamous system and trigger rivalry, tension, and dynamism between heteronormative relations and the enamored female characters, and thus create multiple and divergent models of triangulated love inside the marriage institution.

Jin Fangquan’s *A Tale of Exceptional Chastity*, discussed in chapter 3, and Wang Oushang’s *A Tale of Vacuity*, discussed in chapter 5, are two important and only recently discovered *tanci* works by women authors who suffered during the Taiping Rebellion as war refugees. This polemical social and political milieu for both Jin and Wang induced personal loss, dislocation, and exile, and is recorded and depicted through richly diversified and deeply affecting illustrations through the two authors’ individualistic lenses. Among currently discovered *tanci*, Jin’s work affords precious and extensive personal accounts of the traumatic impact of the Taiping Rebellion on women of the Jiangnan regions. Jin, like the eminent authors Zheng Danruo and Wang Oushang, responded to this historical moment of national crisis and epochal trauma by way of direct authorial articulations of indignation and nostalgia, and through fictional reconfigurations of chastity as a form of moral exemplarity and political integrity. Specifically, Jin’s exposition and development of *luanli* (chaos and exile) in *tanci* narrative indicate women authors’ increased social participation in witnessing, recording, and portraying wartime political realities when they were forced to leave the inner quarters and personal sites of belonging, and to explore a new form of social and physical mobility as travelers of distant and unfamiliar terrains. Against this epochal scene of social change, Jin’s story surpasses earlier works in her exploration of female exemplarity through redefinitions of orthodox values of virtue and talent, beauty and mandate. The story transforms the conventional discourses on female exemplars of chaste martyrs to narratives of women’s strategic and self-determined moral choices and deeds. Further, the story reclaims feminine emotions or *qing* as part of the Confucian notion of humaneness.
underlying an exemplary individual. This tactical arrangement in plot and characteriza-
tion emphasizes the heroines’ autonomous position in defining feminine emotion-
ality, be it orthodox passions of chastity, filial piety, or private feelings of love. The text
presents a syncretistic stance in its vision of an early modern feminine subject, chan-
eled through rewritings of discourses about female talent, beauty, and mandate. The
manifest inconsistency between Jin’s cautionary authorial voice and the courageous
expressions of her heroines perhaps indicates an ideological dilemma of reconciling
personal ideals of exceptionalism with the discursive frames that shape and constitute
the cultural and social views of feminine subjectivity.

Resonating with Jin Fangquan’s articulation of talent as a constituent part of fe-
nale exemplarity, Sun Deying’s Affinity of the Golden Fish, as chapter 4 illustrates, ex-
spands the literati feminine norm in Ming Qing women’s literature by portraying wom-
en’s literary and artistic talent in vernacular cultural contexts. The author Sun Deying
explicitly expresses a feminine consciousness in writing, stating that her story pur-
portedly “expresses the ambition of women in the world” (1:1). In traditional Chinese
thought, there are three ways to achieve immortality, including 立功 (li gong, action),
立德 (li de, virtue) and 立言 (li yan, words). Grace S. Fong observes that this notion
of immortality was “in no way lost in educated women” in late imperial China (Fong,
Herself an Author 4). Daria Berg points out that early modern Chinese literary women
are at once writing subjects themselves and objects of literary constructions under the
gazes of male scholars, editors, biographers, and the reading public, as well the gazes
of other women authors (Berg, Women and the Literary World in Early Modern China
5). Women authors themselves, as Berg suggests, could also be agents using “the power
of the eye and the power of the mind” to garner social and public visibility, and gain
appreciation from like-minded audiences of their time (6). Such is the case with Sun
Deying, whose borrowing, reinvention, and development of the literati feminine form
in her tanci work invites new understandings and interpretations of feminine talent in
the context of a rising vernacular literary and cultural trend. The text’s diversified ar-
ticulation of female talent is not only manifested through the disguised heroine Zhu
Yunping’s outstanding traits of gentility as a poet and writer, but also through a broad
array of talented and intelligent minor heroines of more humble familial background
and upbringing. Mirroring the heroine’s talent and achievements, some minor female
characters also strike the readers because of their education, learning, poetic sensibili-
ties, or writing competencies. The text not only recounts a tale of a disguised heroine
who succeeds in enacting a literatus identity through physical and literary transves-
tism, but also signals the increased prominence and recognition of women’s learning
in gentry class households and vernacular cultural situations alike.

The last chapter analyzes a recently reprinted tanci work A Tale of Vacuity by Wang
Oushang. Reminiscent of personal experiences of the aforementioned Jin Fangquan,
Wang Oushang and her family migrated in multiple self-exiles to escape from the invading Taiping Rebellion armies. Whereas the plot of the book is situated in the previous Ming dynasty and does not directly illustrate the sociopolitical turbulences of her era, Wang’s *tanci* possibly resorted to the narrative strategy of 借古諷今 (*jiegu fengjin*), that is, borrowing from the past to satirize the present, a tactic that is frequently utilized in other *tanci* works, such as *Heaven Rains Flowers* and *Pomegranate Flowers*. Resonant with the illustrations of heroines’ political passions, loyalty, and the ideals of the nation-state in the earlier *tanci* *Heaven Rains Flowers*, Wang’s work shifts and disrupts the conventional nation-state romance in the following aspects. First, the text’s adaptation and rewriting of General Yue Fei’s legacy in plot and inserted commemorative poems dedicated to Yue Fei, besides affirming the male protagonist’s loyalty and patriotism, opens up a space for the authorial narrator’s literary transvestism through appropriation and emulation of masculine, nationalist passions. Second, illustrations of courageous women warriors and generals—and female martial talent and stratagem at war—celebrate women’s collective political participation and exceptional achievements in defending the nation on the battlefield. Among current *tanci* works, the novel’s characterization of the disguised heroine Pei Zixiang as an eminent Confucian scholar-official also stands out among others, as Pei not only completely rejects refeminization, but also receives the court’s ultimate recognition of “his” identity as an indispensable minister of the state and a pillar of the nation after “his” death. In a comparative light, Chen Duansheng’s *Destiny of Rebirth*, halted at the moment of Lijun’s pending death upon the exposure of her femininity, perhaps bespeaks the improbability of the adventurous heroine’s reconciliation with social reality. Qiu Xinru’s *Blossoms from the Brush* possibly indicates that the cross-dresser’s refeminization, rather than being a mere reconciliation of social and familial pressures, could initiate a relocation of feminine authority in the domestic sphere. Wang Oushang’s *A Tale of Vacuity*, unlike the above two works, presents the heroine’s determined denial of social reconciliation in defense of her hard-earned identity as an autonomous individual.

Current readings of these understudied *tanci* texts lead to exciting directions for future research. Studies of women’s *tanci* at present have transcended the theoretical frame of genre studies or of analyzing these narratives as gendered texts; however, there is still a notably large repertoire of *tanci* fictional works by Ming Qing women authors that await scholarly attention and rigorous research. Among women’s *tanci* composed during the Qing, *Sansheng shi tanci* (*A Tanci of the Three-Life Stone*), authored by Huang Xiaqin 黃小琴, and *Chi yulianhua* (*A Scarlet Jade Lotus*), Wang Oushang’s first *tanci*, *Qunying zhuan* (*Legend of the Heroes*), and *Xingchou pian* (*A Tanci to Awaken Myself from Sorrows*), authored by Shen Qinghua 沈清華, are texts of prominent research value. Quite a number of such texts exist only in hand-copied form or as sole copies, and are yet to be reprinted or
made available for researchers’ access by their holding libraries. Ensuing studies of these texts will introduce today’s readers to an immense collection of feminine literary productions, and facilitate a truly situated and in-depth understanding of the formation and evolvement of women’s discursive horizons in the transforming cultural environment of late imperial China. Continuous and extended research on Ming Qing women’s *tanci* works is beneficial in furthering historicized and comparative scrutinization of the complex definitions of authorship, women’s self-representation, the connections of *tanci* writers to female writers of other genres, and their possible social networks of negotiations, exchanges, and support. Melissa E. Sanchez, in reviewing scholarship on writing gender and class in early modern England, rightly observes that feminist, new historicist, and cultural materialist critics have insisted that “literary texts emerge in dialogue with the gendered, political, social, and material structures of their historical moment” (Sanchez 533). Likewise, in the Ming Qing contexts, texts that were considered as “noncanonical,” such as *tanci* narratives, refract the interchange and interconnections of popular creativity and literary inventions, and are indispensable constituents of the early modern literary and cultural landscape. Reading and analyzing these rare and important writings by women entails not only studying them as objects of inquiry, but also deriving critical methods and methodologies from them, and understanding these sources as windows to new insights into gendered writing, popular cultures, and the formation of diverse trends of vernacular literature.

Besides, quite a few *tanci* works, such as the late Ming work *Jade Bracelets* and the nineteenth-century *tanci* novel *Brocade Flowers*, provide profuse depictions of foreign princesses with magical powers, military stratagem, and diplomatic talents. Several *tanci* novels depict exotic heroines from the kingdoms of Liao, Jin, the Huns, the West Rong, the West Fan, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Luzon, as well as from fictional nations. These heroines facilitate rich dynastic imaginaries of geographical, cultural, and political others, and portray a complex and broad spectrum of racialized femininity that was appropriated or displaced for the expression of Confucian virtues or nationalist passions. Tales such as *Jade Bracelets* and 珍珠旗 (*Zhenzhu qi*, The Pearl Flag) portray foreign princesses as heroic characters with magical powers whose dedication to war, espionage, and military intelligence could play a fundamental role in imperial conquest or defense against invasions. However, a significant number of other *tanci* tales depict foreign princesses as virtuous, educated court women who find their bonds with the Chinese empire and through interracial marriages become effectual cross-cultural ambassadors. Many examples of foreign princesses could be found in later nineteenth-century *tanci* novels, such as 錦上花 (*Jinshanghua*, Flowers on the Brocade), 桃柳爭春 (*Taoliu zhengchun*, Spring of Peach Blossoms and Willow Trees), and 賜笏樓 (*Cihu lou*, Pavilion of the Ivory Scepter). A few *tanci* novels depict characters from the Chinese empire who are “adopted” as princesses by foreign
countries. Later on in the stories, these heroines facilitate diplomatic exchanges, conduct espionage, or expedite the surrender of the other kingdom. 十粒金丹 (Shili jindan, Ten Grains of the Golden Elixir) and 梨花夢 (Libuameng, The Dream of Pear Blossoms) depict adopted “foreign” princesses who are Chinese women and travel to distant lands. These adopted “foreign” princesses indicate the performativity of gendered and racial identities, and the characters’ border-crossing mobility and resourcefulness in seeking autonomy and survival. Such depictions of foreign princesses allow the authors to project nascent geopolitical imaginations about the native and the foreign, the nation-state and the adjacent kingdoms. Portrayals of foreign princesses allow the readers to reconceive the ideals of nation and citizenship through an ironized point of view, and sometimes even replace an imperialistic discourse of the Chinese empire with an overturned discourse of the nation and self. Tales of foreign princesses call attention to the convention of “marriage alliance” and illustrate the possibility of embodying the marriage regime with political impact. Interracial marriages of foreign princesses into the Chinese empire designate women as mobile and powerful agents in pacifying disputes between nations and fortifying intercultural connections.

A productive direction for future research is the representation of war, nation, and women’s gendered political consciousness in women’s tanci in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Among the few new tanci works composed by women in the early twentieth century, the Nanjing-born author Zhang Laisun’s 杜鵑血 (Dujuan xue, Blood of the Cuckoo Bird, completed in 1938, published in 1944) is the latest work in the narrative tradition of women’s written tanci. According to a preface by a female cousin of the author, Zhang Laisun, whose artistic name is Maichou nüshi 埋愁女史, was born in Nanjing city, Jiangsu province. Zhang was widowed at an early age. After the Anti-Japanese War broke out, Zhang left her hometown, went to Anhui province, and passed away in Huaining county in 1938. Her son subsequently entrusted Zhang’s cousin Duanmu Wanlan 端木畹蘭 with this work. In 1944, the manuscript, after being edited by Du Mingtong 杜明通, came into print. The story in this tanci work takes place in the era of the Anti-Japanese War. It depicts the love relations between a patriotic writer Heng Jianming 恆劍鳴 and his cousin Yun Luhua 雲琭華 who is struggling in a calamitous marriage with a husband addicted to opium. The romance of the progressive Jianming and the traditional Luhua comes to a tragic end with Luhua’s accidental death; the grieving Jianming, under the influence of a progressive friend, forsakes the thought of suicide and devotes himself to the course of national rejuvenation. Tong Lijun observes that this work departs from the female-oriented traditional tanci novels because of its historical setting in the Anti-Japanese War period, a polemical era in which the author lived (Tong, “On the Status of Blood of the Cuckoo Bird ” 73). Though the story could be considered as a tale of 哀情 (aiqing, tragic love) tradition, the tanci’s extraordinary historical setting emphasizes a greater epochal sentiment of
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melancholy, loss, and exile in a war-ridden nation. Zhang’s illustration of the characters’ social and political consciousness receives endorsement from the critic Ye Shengtao, who, in his preface to the *tanci*, praises Zhang for “being able to do away with the styles of old *tanci*, and present the consciousness of her peers in this era” (Ye, quoted in Zhang Laisun, 1). In comparison with Zhang is the earlier Republican author Jiang Yingqing, whose *tanci* fiction and songs accentuate traditional heroines facing the precarious impact of modernization. Zhang’s work, the latest female-authored Republican *tanci*, is of unique importance because of its historical setting of World War II and an ending suggestive of the protagonist’s devotion to a nationalist cause.

As foreshadowed in the introduction of this book, further research could be conducted on the major corpus of *tanci* published under anonymous authorship or artistic names, by productively reflecting on authorship of *tanci* as a constructed concept. The vast majority of chantefable narratives were published with anonymous authorship or under artistic names, and resort to rich, textual self-reflections to imply possible feminine authorship and represent the female writing subject. As Alexis Easley in a study of women writers and Victorian print media, argues: “Anonymity is not just a form of self-repression but is also a response to the identity politics associated with popular authorship” (Easley 22). In *tanci*, anonymity in authorship could be related to educated authors’ anxiety about risking fame and visibility when their works are published, and invites an engaged criticism of anonymity as alternative ways of self-expression. And to bring this dynastic genre to a global audience, more study needs to be conducted on translating *tanci* and translators’ tactics in carrying over discursive differences, register shifts, and multiple voices. Translation of polyvocal texts allows researchers to expand cross-cultural understandings of women’s innovations and aesthetic autonomy. More work needs to be done on translating paratexts, including prefaces, endorsements from male editors, female editors’ interventions, poems by publishers or anonymous commentators on illustrated characters, and poems dedicated to the author by her family or female friends. There is a need to study the linguistic, cultural, and historical gaps in translating theoretically embedded notions such as *guojia* (nation) and the early modern notion of “nation-state,” *yingxiong* (hero) and gendered ideal of heroism, and *jinguo* (women) and its implications in dynastic *tanci* works and fin-de-siècle protofeminist *tanci* tales. The fissures between the original and the translations offer readers a productive encounter with the discursive implications in these complex terms, and remind us to take a theoretical stance in assessing the texts’ historical ambiguities.

This study, finally, invites continuous exploration of women’s agency as writers, editors, and readers of *tanci* tales, and of the complex relations between orality, textuality, and vernacular literacy. As discussed in chapter 1 and other parts of this book, in the Ming Qing period when the notion of literacy was defined by the Confucian ideological discourses, the rise of vernacular literacy in *tanci* texts and performance-based
narratives allowed readers of low levels of education and humble social status to partake in the reading and appreciation of literature. Tanci texts by women, this book argues, is an important medium and emblem for the development of early modern vernacular literacy. The discursive notion of vernacular literacy in the early modern women’s tanci entails rich possibilities of reproducing and redefining the objects and methods of writing beyond the Confucian canonical systems and processes. By relegating the female author to the status of a storyteller, the chantefable rhetoric in tanci tales grants the female authorial narrator a position of authority and speaking power. The vernacular mode underlying tanci stories yields productive ruptures and possibilities of gendered self-representations, bodily valences, and dynamic performances of sexual roles. Linked Rings of Jade illustrates the prominence of vernacular literacy by recuperating theatricality in conventional expressions and characterization, envisioning readership as an epistemological position similar to that of audiences of vernacular drama. Dream of the Pomegranate Flowers’s audacious and melodramatic portrayals of female same-sex intimacies and triangulated love bespoke women’s vernacular imaginations of sexuality within the apparatus of the Confucian social and familial hierarchies. A Tale of Exceptional Chastity illustrates female exemplarity as a vernacular discursive frame that enables women’s appropriation and refashioning of orthodox moral values as means of self-affirmation and self-realization. Affinity of the Golden Fish presents a vernacular imagination of female talent, and constructs a feminine subject in relation with, but different from, the literati feminine subject in mainstream literature. Wang Oushang’s demonstrations of women’s political activism and loyalism to the nation in A Tale of Vacuity effectively verify tanci as a premium vernacular vehicle for disseminating progressive social and political incentives to the mass audiences. The ostensible discrepancy between 案頭彈詞 (antou tanci, written tanci) and 書場彈詞 (shuchang tanci, tanci performance), Qin Yanchun observes, invites scrutinization of the mutual influence of these two immense repertoires of narratives. The discursive intermediality of tanci tales allows the expressions of innovative artistic potentials in the interstices between written, sung, and spoken forms. The textuality of tanci narratives thus stands beyond the writing brush, and could be envisioned as a practice of art or event, or as an ongoing process of performance.