

**The Imagination of Sexuality in Society and Culture: An Inquiry into the Erotic  
Literature of Ming and Qing Society and Gender (1600-1800)**

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## Abstract

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*Yanqing* (erotic and love) literature has a long history in China and peaked during the mid-to late-Ming period (the mid 15th to 1644), paralleling the rise of luxury consumption and commerce. Many writers engaged in this genre, including a significant number of women. In an era dominated by traditional Confucian norms, it is notable how these female authors transcended social expectations to participate in literary pursuits, especially in *yanqing* literature, which was often considered outside the mainstream. More remarkably, women began forming literary communities centered on regional connections and establishing literary exchanges with male writers. This increased visibility allowed female writers to document their voices, marking a significant presence in Chinese literary history.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Sexual desire is an inherent emotional state of mind for humans.<sup>1</sup> From a psychological perspective, in its broadest definition, desire encompasses the pursuit of immediate gratification or the alleviation of discomfort. This includes physiological needs such as food, rest, and sex, as well as psychological urges such as consumer impulses and the compulsive need for media information. According to traditional Chinese thinking, which combines Confucianism and Buddhism, it is proposed that people are born with seven emotions (happiness, anger, sadness, fear, love, evil, desire)<sup>2</sup> and six desires (sexual, appearance, majesty and posture, speech and sound, greed for the softness and smoothness of the body, and desire arising from feelings of compassion and admiration for an endearing individual)<sup>3</sup>. Compared to Western thought, both Buddhism and Confucianism propose that desire is a natural characteristic inherent in humans. In addition to stimulating experiences from the external environment, people are born with desires, further provoking actions based on desires. At the psychological level, a long-standing human issue is that of dealing with these emotions and desires.

During the Ming (1368-1644 AD) and Qing Dynasties (1636/1644-1912 AD), the development of erotic paintings and erotic novels became very diverse. This type of creation presented “the provocation and exploration of erotic humour and people’s hidden sexual consciousness,”<sup>4</sup> and constituted a form of observation of private emotions. An analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm Hofmann, Hiroki P. Kotabe, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Roy F. Baumeister, “Desire and Desire Regulation,” in *The Psychology of Desire* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2015), 62-3.

<sup>2</sup> “What are human emotions? Joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, dislike, and desire—these seven emotions are inherent and require no learning to be felt.” Source is from: Ruan Yuan (阮元) and Lu Xuanxun (盧宣旬), eds., 重刊宋本十三經注疏附校勘記 [Reprint of the Song Edition of the Thirteen Classics with Annotations and Collation Notes] (Nanchang: Nanchang Prefectural School, 1815) (Taipei: Yee Wen Publishing Company, 1965), 431-2.

<sup>3</sup> “Understanding Dhyāna Pāramitā: A Method in Stages (釋禪波羅密次第法門)”, Juan 9.

<sup>4</sup> Huang Kehwu, “Dark Passage: Sexual Desire and Space in Erotic Novels of the Ming and Qing Dynasties,” in *Words Don’t Obscene, Don’t Laugh: Harmony, Eroticism, and the Body in the Modern Chinese Male World* (Taipei: Lianjing Publishing, April 2016), 30.

various forms of expression of eroticism can reveal peoples' perspectives and imagination about eroticism.

Romantic and erotic literature provides a relatively private way to convey vivid narratives and pictures through the author's writing techniques and skills, allowing readers to imagine. Using modern social scientists' research will allow us to explore and understand why people read erotic novels, especially during modern times.<sup>5</sup> The results show that for most female readers, in addition to satisfying their imaginations about love and sexual desire, erotic novels provide a channel to escape reality.<sup>6</sup> Through fiction, readers can use their imagination to vent their desires and even stress without being discovered. It can be seen that the phenomenon of reading erotic novels is not entirely related to the pursuit of sexual desire but that it also provides a means of alleviating negative emotions on a psychological level.

### *1. Historical Background*

Erotic literature has developed over a long period in the history of various civilizations, and the same long-term development trajectory can be seen in Chinese culture. As early as the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC-9 AD), 美人賦 [*Fu on a Beautiful Woman*]<sup>7</sup> by the famous scholar Szuma Hsiangju (司馬相如, 179-117 BC) is recognized as one of the earliest erotic poems in Chinese history.<sup>8</sup> The poem portrays the aesthetic ideals of beauty at

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<sup>5</sup> M. Kraxenberger, C.A. Knoop, & W. Menninghaus, "Who reads contemporary erotic novels and why?" *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 8, 96 (2021): 3. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00764-3>. According to this study, the analyzed data were derived from a 2016 reader survey conducted in Germany, with approximately 427 participants. Additionally, based on the developmental stages of erotic fiction examined in this study, the term "modern times" here refers to the period after the 1970s and 1980s, particularly the peak observed after the 2010s.

<sup>6</sup> M. Kraxenberger, "Who reads contemporary erotic novels and why?" 9. Since most of the samples in this study are female, female readers are used as the research subjects.

<sup>7</sup> Zhang Qiao, *Gu wen yuan* (古文苑) [*Anthology of Ancient Prose*] 1: Juan 3 (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1937), 84-7. Accessed on: <https://taiwanebook.ncl.edu.tw/zh-tw/book/PTHS-9910020832>.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Hans van. Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: a Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961), 68-9.

the time by depicting a woman's slender physique and smooth skin, partially revealed beneath her garments.

The Ming Dynasty was a turning point in the development of erotic literature. As society became more prosperous and natural disasters and foreign military invasions decreased, luxurious consumption habits and culture began to flourish, centered in the Jiangnan region and large cities.<sup>9</sup> However, how did this phenomenon develop and what was the relationship between luxury consumption and the erotic industry? Some scholars believe, considering the development of Neo-Confucian thought and theories of desire during the Ming dynasty, that it was the pursuit of “sensual desires” that stimulated the development of luxury consumption; at the same time, eroticism itself resulted in luxury consumption in erotic-related industries.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, since the middle and late Ming Dynasty,<sup>11</sup> the development of erotic literature further entered a new stage of development with the prevalence of an erotic industry and conspicuous luxury consumption. At the same time, the printing industry in the Ming Dynasty promoted the popularity of popular literature, and reading materials that combined visuals and text were an important element of this phenomenon. Driven by this trend of consuming luxury goods, the citizen class, with its increased spending power, increasingly purchased popular texts, including erotic literature.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Wu Renshu, *Shechi de Nüren: Ming Qing Shiqi Jiangnan Funü de Xiaofei Wenhua (Extravagant Women: Women's Consumption Culture in Ming and Qing Jiangnan)* (Taipei: San Min Book, 2005), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Wu Renshu, *Shechi de Nüren: Ming Qing Shiqi Jiangnan Funü de Xiaofei Wenhua*, 65-6.

<sup>11</sup> In academic discussions, the mid-Ming period is often considered to have begun in the latter half of the 15th century, during the reigns of Emperor Xianzong (1465-1487) and Emperor Xiaozong (1488-1505). This era witnessed significant changes in political, economic, and household registration systems. The late Ming period, on the other hand, is commonly marked by the reign of Emperor Shenzong (1573–1620), which is recognized as a turning point indicating the notable decline of the Ming dynasty. Danjo Hiroshi, Tingyu Guo trans., *Rikukai No Kousaku: Minchou no koubou* (New Taipei City: Linking Publishing Co., Ltd., 2021), 121-6 & 187-90.

<sup>12</sup> Wu Yifang, “Female Sexual Enlightenment in the Male Imagination: The Case of Ming and Qing Dynasty Erotic Texts.” Master's Thesis of Department of Chinese Literature (Taoyuan: Central University, June 2012), 28. Accessed August 29, 2020.

[http://ir.lib.ncu.edu.tw:88/thesis/view\\_etd.asp?URN=981201002&fileName=GC981201002.pdf](http://ir.lib.ncu.edu.tw:88/thesis/view_etd.asp?URN=981201002&fileName=GC981201002.pdf).

Given this environment conducive to the creation of erotic literature, the question of who participated in this type of literary creation is a focus worthy of discussion. All erotic literary works that have been circulated to the present day, including representative novels such as *Jin ping mei* (金瓶梅) [*The Plum in the Golden Vase*], *Rou putuan* (肉蒲團) [*The Carnal Prayer Mat*], and *Ruyijun zhuan* (如意君傳) [*The Tale of Master Ru Yi*], or the erotic poems contained in these novels, are available thanks to the compilers of the collected works. The work of the compilers has allowed these works to be available and to be read for hundreds of years and they continue to be circulated and read. In fact, the collection and compilation of literary works was not uncommon in ancient China. Literati have continued to devote themselves to this work over the years and have successfully preserved many famous and classic literary works.

Throughout history, most literary works collected into volumes were written by male writers. Wang Shizhen (王士禛, 1634-1711), a famous scholar in the late Ming Dynasty, is such an example. Some scholars believe that it was the members of the poetry society he participated in and their connections that allowed the promotion of Wang's famous poem "Autumn Willow" (秋柳) to be widely circulated.<sup>13</sup> The difference in literacy rates and education levels between men and women in ancient China resulted in a gap in the number of works that could be selected for inclusion in the anthology. In addition, the choice of which works to include involved the compiler's personal preferences and compilation goals and could even be said to be a way of expressing Chinese literary criticism.<sup>14</sup> Before the Ming Dynasty, the number of male works included was obviously more than that of female works. However, subjected to various restrictions, the works of female writers have been collected in

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<sup>13</sup> Li Waiyee, *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), 63.

<sup>14</sup> Zhang Hongsheng, Reception of Chen Weisong's Ci in the Literary Circle of the Yongzheng and Qianlong Periods, *Journal of Chinese Studies*, no. 57 (July, 2013), 216.  
[https://doi.org/10.29708/JCS.CUHK.201307\\_\(57\).0008](https://doi.org/10.29708/JCS.CUHK.201307_(57).0008)

large quantities and brought to the world's attention, which indeed benefited from the trend of women's literary collections that began in the Ming Dynasty.

Why have so many compiled books of women's works been published since the Ming Dynasty? In the middle and late Ming Dynasty, male literati were limited in their career development, especially in the new form of imperial examinations, eight-legged essays (八股文).<sup>15</sup> Under the pressure to obtain official positions and ascend into the ranks of power, as well as the constraints imposed by societal expectations and the clan system, they lacked the same dedication to poetry, *ci*, and prose composition as scholars of previous dynasties. Furthermore, repeated failures in the imperial examination only deepened their sense of frustration. Many frustrated literati turned their attention to collecting works by women.<sup>16</sup> This approach allowed male literati to “help women gain literary fame.” Helping more marginalized female groups, especially female writers, to become orthodox built a sense of personal accomplishment for these marginalized female literati, who were faced with the frustration of the examination system.<sup>17</sup> Thanks to such literary compilations, women's works were collected in large quantities and spread systematically. It is worth discussing the criteria editors use to select works deemed “excellent” and “worthy of inclusion.”

The traditional Chinese literary criticism concept originated from *Dianlun* (典論) [*Discourse on Literature*], the first book dedicated to literary criticism in Chinese history, which was written by Cao-Wei Dynasty Cao Pi (曹丕, 187-226, Three Kingdoms period). “In literature *qi* is the dominant factor. *Qi* has its normative forms — either *qing* (清) [pure] or

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<sup>15</sup> The “eight-legged essay” (八股文) was a prose style that flourished during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Its defining characteristic was the division of the essay into eight distinct sections, following a structured progression of introduction, development, and conclusion. Additionally, it was the required form for the imperial civil service examination. As such, it became an essential writing format that scholars aspiring to pass the imperial exams during the Ming and Qing periods had to master.

<sup>16</sup> Sun Chang Kang-i, “Gender and Canonicity: Ming-Qing Women Poets in the Eyes of the Male Literati.” *Hsiang Lectures on Chinese Poetry* 1, no. 1 (2001): 3. Accessed July 11, 2022. <https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/books/pr76f801x?locale=en>.

<sup>17</sup> Sun Chang Kang-i, “Gender and Canonicity: Ming-Qing Women Poets in the Eyes of the Male Literati,” 3.

*zhuo* (濁) [murky]. It is not to be brought forth by force.”<sup>18</sup> Cao Pi assumed that there is “qi in literature” in each writing, and *qi* means the author’s talent. The writings’ characteristics differ according to each author’s talents and style. Whether the *qi* of an article is clear or unclear, using such adjectives to describe the characteristics of each work is a special vocabulary in Chinese literary criticism and can show the relation with Daoism qi cosmology. Such critical perspectives, like Confucian and Daoist thought, extended through the Ming and Qing dynasties, influencing the selection criteria for literary anthologies.

The compilation of women’s literary works began to flourish during the Ming dynasty. Examples include *Xiaotan luan shi hui ke guixiu ci* (小檀樂室彙刻閨秀詞) [*Collected Lyrics of Talented Women from the Xiaotanluan Studio*], *Suiyuan nu sizi shi xuan* (隨園女弟子詩選) [*Selected Poems by the Female Disciples of Suiyuan*], *Mingyuan shi wei chu bian* (名媛詩緯初編) [*Poetic Textures of Eminent Women: First Compilation*], *Mingyuan shi hua* (名媛詩話) [*Poetry Talks on Eminent Women*], *Mingyuan shi gui* (名媛詩歸) [*Collected Poems of Eminent Women*], *Minchuan guixiu shi hua xu bian* (閩川閨秀詩話續編) [*Supplement to the Poetry Talks on Talented Women from Minchuan*], and *Lan gui bao lu* (蘭閨寶錄) [*Precious Record of the Orchid Chamber*]. The compilers of these anthologies were not only men but also included women:

“After reading *The Linxia Anthology*, I found that it contains the poetry of talented women from four dynasties, but even when combined with the works of renowned courtesans, Daoist nuns, and other gifted women, there are barely a hundred names in total. Could it be that so few women composed poetry? Not at all. Most of these women lived confined within their chambers, their words seldom heard beyond those walls. Without the freedom to travel, to exchange poems, or to enjoy the beauty of the natural world, their talents had little opportunity for expression. As a result, their works were few and their legacy limited in reach.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cao Pi (曹丕), “Lun wen (論文)” in *Dianlun* (典論) [*Discourse on Literature*]. The translation is from: Kang-i Sun Chang, “Gender and Canonicity: Ming-Qing Women Poets in the Eyes of the Male Literati,” 6.

<sup>19</sup> Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luan shi hui ke guixiu ci: fu guixiu ci chao shi liujuan*, fasc 19 (Qing Guangxu er 11 nian zhi Xuantong 1 nian 1895-1909), 序.1a.

Prior to this, it was not that women did not engage in literary creation, but rather that their works received little attention and were not collected. This situation was not only due to the spatial restrictions imposed on women within the boudoir but also significantly influenced by the male-dominated literary criticism and consciousness.

In these compiled collections, in addition to many works that meet the standards of elegant literary criticism, *wen* (文) and *ya* (雅), there are also many erotic creations and even erotic literature collections. Books such as *Qinglou yun yu* (青樓韻語) [*The Rhymes of Qinglou*]<sup>20</sup> and *Siwuxie hui bao xuan* (思無邪匯寶) [*Treasured Anthology of "Thoughts Without Depravity"*]<sup>21</sup> are famous examples of this literary genre. In the face of the mainstream view of literary criticism imbued with what were considered high moral standards, how were these works collected into a volume? Were there any particular criteria for their inclusion? In addition, what are the characteristics of these erotic works? Focusing on the women who created these works, what were their identities, creative backgrounds, and creative motivations? In addition, the themes of these women who were engaged in erotic creation were obviously different from the literary concepts that emphasized “*qing*” at that time. Therefore, had their works been criticized? In this paper, an analysis of the works of these female writers, whether gentry women or courtesans, reveals the constraints imposed on their thinking by traditional ritual norms. At the same time, however, they did not hesitate to express their emotions and imagination through writing. The interactions within female literary circles, as well as their exchanges with male scholars, demonstrate an engagement free from negative criticism.

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<sup>20</sup> Edited by Zhang Menghui, and annotated by Chu Yuanliang. *Qinglou yun yu* (青樓韻語) [*The Rhymes of Qinglou*] (Shanghai: Central Book Store, 1935).

<sup>21</sup> Edited by Chen Qinghao and Wang Qiugui, *Siwuxie hui bao xuan* (思無邪匯寶) [*Treasured Anthology of "Thoughts Without Depravity"*]: Ming Qing Erotic Fiction. Taipei: Taiwan Britannica, 1997.

When discussing female creative groups, their interactions with male literati cannot be ignored. China's social concepts, ideas about etiquette, and Confucianist manner, were emphasized again under the rise of Neo-Confucianism.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the traditional social roles of men and women dictated that “males lead outside, females lead inside,” which means that females were restricted inside the house or the “inner quarters” without easy contact with others or with the outside world. In this context it is not difficult to imagine that erotic literature would have faced harsh and unbearable criticisms from some shidafu (士大夫) who strictly defended Confucianism. These writings would also have been forbidden by the Imperial court. In spite of this, female writers participated in literary creation during the same period, developing women-centered literature. These female writers were from numerous classes, such as women members of the shidafu family, palace maids, prostitutes. Sui Garden female students followed a prestigious Qing male writer, Yuan Mei; their writings were collected and edited in *Suiyuan nu dizi shi xuan* (隨園女弟子詩選) [*Selected Poems by the Female Disciples of Suiyuan*].<sup>23</sup> Those shidafus' wives and daughters used the interaction between their male family members and other shidafus to share literary space.

On the other hand, prostitutes followed the preferences of male customers and gradually transformed into using literature and art to obtain male preferences and thus participated in the literary world.<sup>24</sup> Catering male preferences by showcasing literary talent and thereby earning their approval was a means to participate. The essential point that made women start to share the same literary space is the connection and relation with male writers.

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<sup>22</sup> Liu Jeeloo, *Neo-Confucianism : Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality*, First edition (Hoboken: Wiley, 2018). Neo-Confucianism first emerged in the mid-9th century and began to gain prominence during the 11th to 12th centuries of the Song Dynasty, largely due to the contributions of renowned Confucian scholars such as Zhu Xi. Its influence has persisted into the 20th and 21st centuries, remaining a cornerstone of Confucian thought.

<sup>23</sup> Edited by Yuan Mei, *Suiyuan nu dizi shi xuan* (隨園女弟子詩選) [*Selected Poems by the Female Disciples of Suiyuan*]: 6 juan (坊刻巾箱本, 1796-1850). Accessed from: <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/results-work.php?workID=35&language=ch>.

<sup>24</sup> Ouyang Zhen, *Research on Female Poets in Brothels in Ming Dynasty* (Kweilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2014).

In other words, women were in a passive position, awaiting assistance from men who were already established in the field.

Therefore, what was their motivation for writing? How did society evaluate the phenomenon? How is sexual desire depicted and understood in female writing in comparison with male writers? It is clear that women in that period had achieved a greater voice in literature and even participated in erotic writing. Their motivation and interaction with all gender and society are valuable to research. Mastering the art of writing provided them with an outlet for the expression of sexual desire and emotions, while the establishment of literary networks allowed their explorations of emotions and desires to extend beyond the inner chambers. Through these networks, they engaged with others and received critical reception.

Erotic literature reflects the entanglement between social perspectives on desire and Confucian ritual norms, the flourishing of erotic expression, and the ruling authorities' futile attempts at suppression. As more women engaged in erotic writing and gained visibility in the literary sphere, the genre developed with greater diversity. This study aims to examine how men perceived women's participation in erotic literature—their impressions and views on female literary production. Beyond their identity as writers, the motivations behind women's engagement in erotic writing also merit discussion. With increased familial support and greater opportunities for literary gatherings and associations, women gradually broke free from the constraints of "virtue," using writing to articulate their erotic imagination and even to share and interact with other literati. The diversity of Ming and Qing society is reflected in both material culture and expressions of desire. Through literary creation, these ideas were conveyed in written form. Understanding human emotions provides valuable insight into the social fabric of the Ming and Qing periods.

## 2. Historiography

The social and cultural history of the Ming and Qing dynasties boasts a rich and voluminous historiography. Regarding the study of women's literature in the Ming and Qing dynasties, Dorothy Ko's *Teachers of the Inner Chamber: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-century China*,<sup>25</sup> discusses the social and human relationship between women and men and explores how the concept of "sexual desire" works within the framework of social culture. Susan Mann's *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*<sup>26</sup> outlines the position of women in the family and society from the perspectives of life course, literary writing, entertainment activities, work and labor, and religion. Grace S. Fong and Ellen Widmer's *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing*,<sup>27</sup> discusses the limitations and breakthroughs of women's writing produced through illness, sadness, and also through the support of friendship circles. Analysis of the writings of these women allow us to understand their responses to dynastic and political realities of their time. Goyama Kiwamu's *Women and Literature in the Ming and Qing Dynasties*,<sup>28</sup> discusses society's concept of chastity and the projection of women's images. Kiwamu's analysis of the literary creations of women presents the various aspects of the negotiation between women and literature in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The above studies also discuss the nature of women's lives during that period as well as their literary activities and production.

As for the study of sexual culture, the research results are also enlightening. R. H. van Gulik's *The Red Pavilion: A Chinese Detective Story* and *Sexual life in Ancient China: A*

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<sup>25</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>26</sup> Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Grace S. Fong, and Ellen. Widmer. *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Kiwamu Goyama, Trans by Xiao Yan-Wan, *Women and Literature in the Ming and Qing Dynasties* (New Taipei, Linking Publishing Company, 2017).

*Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.*,<sup>29</sup> Xiong Bingzhen and Lu Miaofen's *Ritual and Eroticism: Post/Modern Sexuality in Pre-Modern Chinese Culture*,<sup>30</sup> illustrate the changes and characteristics of Chinese sexuality culture throughout the ages. Kang Zhengguo's *Revisiting the Wind and Moon: Sex and Classical Chinese Literature*,<sup>31</sup> discusses the rise and development of erotic writing and analyzes two classic erotic novels, *Jin ping mei* and *Rou putuan*. Huang Kehwu's "Dark Passage: Sexual Desire and Space in Erotic Novels of the Ming and Qing Dynasties,"<sup>32</sup> focuses on the power struggle between men and women in the sexual space in the Ming and Qing dynasties and how curtains, walls, and other objects construct a hidden sexual space. Wu Yifang's "Female Sexual Enlightenment in the Male Imagination: The Case of Ming and Qing Dynasty Erotic Texts,"<sup>33</sup> discusses how erotic texts shaped women's perceptions of sex, in addition to the way that women balance inclusive enlightenment and social discipline. Duan Huaiqing's article "Wang Tao and the 'Zhongguo Xiangyan Zhongguo' and the 'Twelve Types of Xiangyan',"<sup>34</sup> points out the deep-rooted elite thinking and the embrace of family and country in Chinese writers through the erotic works of Wang Tao in different periods in the late Qing dynasty. *The Poetics and Politics of Sensuality in China: the "Fragrant and*

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Hans van. Gulik, *The Red Pavilion: a Chinese Detective Story*. New York: Scribner, 1968.

<sup>30</sup> Xiong Bingzhen, and Miaofen Lu, [*Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and Human Desires: Post / Modernity in Late Imperial Chinese Culture*]. 禮教與情慾：前近代中國文化中的後／現代性 (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Kang Zhengguo, [*Revisiting the Wind and Moon: Sex and Classical Chinese Literature*], 風騷與艷情——中國古典詩詞的女性研究 (Taipei: Maitian Publishing Co., Ltd., 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Huang Kehwu, "Dark Passage: Sexual Desire and Space in Erotic Novels of the Ming and Qing Dynasties," in [*Words Don't Obscene, Don't Laugh: Harmony, Eroticism, and the Body in the Modern Chinese Male World*], 言不褻不笑：近代中國男性世界中的諧謔、情慾與身體 (Taipei: Lianjing Publishing, April 2016).

<sup>33</sup> Wu Yifang, "[Female Sexual Enlightenment in the Male Imagination: The Case of Ming and Qing Dynasty Erotic Texts] 男性想像中的女性性啟蒙——以明清豔情文本為例," Master's Thesis of Department of Chinese Literature, Taoyuan: Central University, June 2012. Accessed August 29, 2020. [http://ir.lib.ncu.edu.tw:88/thesis/view\\_etd.asp?URN=981201002&fileName=GC981201002.pdf](http://ir.lib.ncu.edu.tw:88/thesis/view_etd.asp?URN=981201002&fileName=GC981201002.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Duan Huaiqing, "[Wang Tao and the 'Zhongguo Xiangyan Zhongguo' and the 'Twelve Types of Xiangyan] 王韜與《艷史叢鈔》《香艷叢書》及《艷史十二種》," *Journal of Fujian Normal University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, no. 215: 64-70. Accessed October 20, 2021. DOI: 10.12046/j.issn.1000-5285.2019.02.009.

*Bedazzling” Movement (1600-1930)* by Li Xiaorong,<sup>35</sup> illustrates the relationship between erotic literature and society, and the political environment. The above works provide a framework through which we can discuss the connotations and the influence of erotic literature.

This research focuses on the late Ming to mid-Qing period, a time that marked both the peak of erotic literature and the highest compilation of female-authored works. This period provides abundant material for examining how female writers expressed emotions and desires in their literary creations. Existing research predominantly centers on erotic literature written by male authors and the broader erotic culture of society, with relatively little attention given to the erotic poetry and lyrics composed by women during this time. Since erotic literature flourished from the late Ming Dynasty, many works were still written and published at the end of the Ming dynasty and into the beginning of the Qing Dynasty. *The Rhymes of Qinglou* is a milestone of the flowering phenomenon, edited by Chang Meng-Hui and Chu Yuanliang, including numerous poems by more than a hundred prostitutes.<sup>36</sup> For *Xiaotan luan shi hui ke guixiu ci*, edited by Xu Naichang, a complete collection of Qing women’s writings.<sup>37</sup> It contains sixteen juans (卷) poems, all written by Qing women writers. In addition, some poems record the erotic imagination by *yongwu* (詠物) [poetry on objects], describing or chanting things, by these women writers. Many other collections of women’s

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<sup>35</sup> Li Xiaorong, *The Poetics and Politics of Sensuality in China: the “Fragrant and Bedazzling” Movement (1600-1930)*. Amherst: Cambria Press, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Edited by Zhang Menghui, and annotated by Chu Yuanliang. *Qinglou yun yu* (青樓韻語) [*The Rhymes of Qinglou*] (Shanghai: Central Book Store, 1935).

<sup>37</sup> Edited by Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luan shi hui ke guixiu ci* (小檀樂室匯刻閨秀詞) [*Collected Lyrics of Talented Women from the Xiaotanluan Studio*]: 10 ji 100 zhong 100 juan (Xiao tan luan shi edition, 1909). <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/chinese/index.php>.

works gathered in the Ming and Qing Dynasty, such as *Mingyuan shi gui*,<sup>38</sup> *Tong Guan's New Edition*,<sup>39</sup> are also historical materials for reference.

### 3. Methodology

The current research results include studies on sexual culture, erotic literature, women's literature, women's writings, and even women's erotic literature. It will not only focus on sexuality but also will analyze the status of female writers in the history of Chinese literature. I use books such as *The Rhymes of Qinglou*, *Xiao tan luan shi hui ke gui xiu ci*, and "Ming Qing Women's Writings" an online database as my primary sources. These materials cover the works of women in the Ming and Qing dynasties, from which the erotic works created by women will be selected in order to understand how women describe eroticism. In addition, with respect to the erotic literature written by men, the second half of *The Rhymes of Qinglou*, the works of male writers in the Qing dynasty, serves as a valuable reference, particularly in its depiction of the courtesan industry and women from a male perspective. *Si Wu Xie Hui Bao*,<sup>40</sup> which collected the erotic novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties, is also an important source. For example, *Jin Ping Mei* is an essential work in the study of Chinese erotic novels.

Due to the large number of authors included in various literary collections, the selection of individual writers and groups for discussion will require an examination of the existing research. This includes Wu Shangxi (吳尚熹, 1796-1850), Sun Yunhe (孫雲鶴,

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<sup>38</sup> Edited by Zhong Xing (鍾惺), *Mingyuan shi gui* (名媛詩歸) [*Collected Poems of Eminent Women*]: 36 juan (1621-1644 version). Accessed from: <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/results-work.php>.

<sup>39</sup> Edited by Zhang Zixiang (張之象), *Tong guan xinbian* (彤管新編) [*Tong Guan's New Edition*] is collected in: Zhou Fujun (周復俊), Chen Kai (陳澧), Li Zhi (李贄), Zhang Zhixiang (張之象), and Wang Huachun (王化醇), *Sikuquanshu cunmu congshu bubian* (四庫全書存目叢書補編) [*Supplement to the Series of Surviving Titles from the Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*] 13. Accessed from Stanford online Library: <https://library.stanford.edu/eal/chinese-collections/new-and-notable-acquisitions/si-ku-series>.

<sup>40</sup> Edited by Chen Qinghao and Wang Qiugui. *Siwuxie hui bao xuan* (思無邪匯寶) [*Treasured Anthology of "Thoughts Without Depravity"*] (Taipei: Taiwan Britannica, 1997).

1766-1816), Sun Yunfeng (孫雲鳳, 1764-1814), and Zhou Qiong (周瓊, 1610-1671), for example. These women writers, according to scholars, used the description of women's hands, eyebrows, mouths, and other parts to express eroticism.<sup>41</sup> In addition, like *Xiao tan luan shi hui ke gui xiu ci*, each female author has short biographical introductions. For example, the introduction to Shen Shanbao (沈善寶, 1808-1862) includes “she has more than one hundred female students” and “several of her poems are included in *Mingyuan shihua* (名媛詩話),<sup>42</sup> which she edited.”<sup>43</sup> These sources are valuable; they offer a better understanding of each author's life and allow a basis for selecting other primary historical materials. By examining these anthologies primarily featuring esteemed women writers, one can further explore their individual literary collections to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the selection criteria used in both types of compilations. Additionally, personal collections provide valuable insights into the authors' interactions with others, which can be traced through the contributors of prefaces and postscripts, as well as the names mentioned within the works. In this study, the discussion of the aforementioned female authors primarily focuses on their works included in their personal literary collections.

The thesis is structured into four parts: the development of erotic literature in the Ming and Qing dynasties, an examination of the backgrounds of erotic literature writers and their interactions, the representation of sexual imagination in erotic literature, and the influence of social laws and moral norms on erotic literature. The development of literary culture is closely related to society, and the interaction of people involved in literature is also worth exploring. Whether these writers wrote erotic literature for entertainment or for the

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<sup>41</sup> Zhang Hongsheng, “[A Study of Romantic Yongwu Ci by Women Writers in the Qing Dynasty],” *Qinghua xuebao* 48, no. 3 (2018), 531, accessed October 21, 2021, [https://doi.org/10.6503/THJCS.201809\\_48\(3\).0003](https://doi.org/10.6503/THJCS.201809_48(3).0003).

<sup>42</sup> Edited by Shen Shanbao, *Mingyuan shihua shierjuan xu ji sanjuan* (名媛詩話十二卷續集三卷) [*Poetry Talks on Eminent Women*, 12 volumes, with a 3-volume sequel]: 15 juan (鴻雪樓刻巾箱本, 1879). Accessed from: <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/results-work.php>.

<sup>43</sup> Edited by Xu Naichang. *Xiaotan luan shi hui ke guixiu ci* (小檀樂室匯刻閨秀詞) [*Collected Lyrics of Talented Women from the Xiaotanluan Studio*], 19-20.

expression of sexual desire, I expect to combine their background and interaction with the erotic writing in the works to understand the expression and communication of people's psychological erotic desires under the moral concepts of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Finally, I aim to analyze such literary actions from a macro-social perspective so that the discussion of literature can return to the track of social culture.

## **Chapter 2: Chinese Sexual Culture**

### *1. Concept: Combination of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism*

Cultural connotations are all-encompassing. When exploring any aspect of culture, it is essential to consider not only the details but also the historical context embedded in cultural heritage. China's culture of sexual desire is a historical phenomenon that has evolved over thousands of years. What historical factors contributed to the development of this cultural aspect? Alternatively, how does sexual desire manifest itself in specific historical contexts? Philosophical thought plays a significant role in shaping the culture of sexual desire. A comprehensive examination of Chinese society and culture reveals a close connection with Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Over time, the development and integration of these philosophical traditions have led to overlapping perspectives on human nature and sexual desire, despite their distinct ideological foundations.

#### *1.1. Before the Introduction of Buddhism*

Chinese philosophical thought has a long history, with its origins traceable to early sources. Concepts such as heaven are found in the *Shi jing* (詩經),<sup>44</sup> the principle of placing

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<sup>44</sup> Phrases such as “Heaven creates the multitude of people; there are principles governing all things. Human nature inherently favors virtuous conduct. (天生烝民，有物有則，民之秉彝，好是懿德)” and “Heaven's mandate is vast and unceasing. Oh, how illustrious is the pure virtue of King Wen. (維天之命，於穆不已。於乎不顯，文王之德之純)” reflect the concept of “transcendental Heaven (形上天)” and “normative Heaven (法

people first in the *Shang shu* (尚書),<sup>45</sup> and views on the order of the universe in the *Yi Jing* (易經).<sup>46</sup> These classical texts convey the culture and spirit of early Chinese society, even though a clear theoretical system had not yet emerged. Since the Zhou Dynasty, China has experienced a flourishing period known as the “Hundred Schools of Thought” (百家爭鳴), during which many philosophical schools thrived. Among these, Confucianism and Daoism have been particularly influential, and their impact continues to be evident in what is often referred to as “Chinese culture” even today.

The development of Confucianism began with the seminal contributions of Confucius and Mencius and continued to evolve over the centuries, particularly from the Han Dynasty onward. Additionally, Daoist and Buddhist theories stimulated its expansion and innovation. It is an undeniable fact that Confucianism has been the dominant philosophical tradition throughout Chinese history and has served as the cornerstone of social and cultural norms. This is evident from its pervasive influence, as Confucianism is often referred to as Confucianism or the Confucian religion, reflecting its profound impact on Chinese social thought.<sup>47</sup>

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則天。” The intangible *Dao of Heaven* (天道) serves as the ultimate embodiment of all principles. Fang Yurun (方玉潤), “Da ya (大雅): Zhen min (蒸民),” “Zhou song (周頌): Wei tian zhi ming (維天之命),” *Shijing yuanshi Vol. 2* (詩經原始下冊) [*Origins of the Book of Songs, Volume II*] (Beijing: Chung Hwa Book Co., Ltd., 1986), 555 & 577.

<sup>45</sup> One may refer to phrases such as “Heaven’s wisdom comes from the wisdom of the people; Heaven’s majesty arises from the people’s reverence. (天聰明，自我民聰明; 天明畏，自我民明威)” and “Heaven sees through the eyes of the people; Heaven hears through the ears of the people. (天視自我民視，天聽自我民聽)” Cai Shen (蔡沈), “Yu shu (虞書): Gao yao mo (皋陶謨),” “Zhou shu (周書): Tai shi (泰誓),” *Jingyin wenyuange sikuquanshu* (景印文淵閣四庫全書) [*Facsimile Edition of the Siku Quanshu from the Wenyuan Pavilion*] (Taipei: The Commercial Press, 2017), 58-20 & 58-70.

<sup>46</sup> The generation and transformation of things are explained through the changes in the trigrams and lines.

<sup>47</sup> For information on how Confucianism is considered a religion and the religious characteristics it contains, please refer to: Tsai Renhou (蔡仁厚), *History of Chinese Philosophy Vol. 1* (Taipei: Student Book CO., LTD., 2011), 69-75. In the second section of “Religion and Religious Spirit,” the Confucian enlightenment and transcendent spirit, the determination of the direction of life, the positioning of cultural ideals, benevolence and righteousness as a way to follow moral ethics are listed, which is in line with the religious creation of personality. The characteristics of history and culture are the reasons why it is constituted as “Confucianism.”

To trace the roots of Confucianism, it is essential to focus on Confucius. Several key concepts summarize the focus of his teachings: the cultivation of virtue (specifically, benevolence), the way of heaven, nature and reason, and the notions of justice and destiny. The term “Ren” (仁) [benevolence] constitutes the core of Confucius’s teachings and connects him to the broader themes of the sage’s way, heaven, and human nature, as well as to the discussion of how individuals should position themselves in the world. What is *Ren*? Before examining its nature, it is important to note that prior to Confucius, *Ren* denoted moral character and appeared in pre-Qin classics such as *Shi Jing* and *Zuo Zhuan* (左傳).<sup>48</sup> Confucius expanded the meaning of *Ren*: it is a personal moral trait, the source of morality, and a universal “whole virtue.”<sup>49</sup> When an individual possesses benevolence, there is a higher aspiration to achieve: becoming a sage. In this context, a “sage” is one who views benevolence as the supreme virtue, embraces the ideals of governing the world and benefiting the people and regards all living beings as deserving of benevolence and care. Confucius said: Only people with Ren can like or dislike someone impartially.”<sup>50</sup>

A benevolent man will establish others if he wants to establish himself, and he will help others if he wants to succeed. Drawing examples from nearby people is a way to be benevolent.<sup>51</sup> Confucius said: Is Ren so far away? I desire Ren, and this is the coming of Ren.<sup>52</sup>

Why did Confucius’s teachings emphasize moral behavior in this world? The concept of “virtue” originated during the Zhou Dynasty, shifting the focus from reverence for deities prevalent in primitive societies to an emphasis on “virtue” as a transcendent value concept associated with heaven. Power was seen as governing the world’s operation and embodying divine will and commands. Over time, this understanding led to the development of a ritual

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<sup>48</sup> Tsai Renhou, *History of Chinese Philosophy Vol. 1*, 54.

<sup>49</sup> Tsai Renhou, *History of Chinese Philosophy Vol. 1*, 55-6.

<sup>50</sup> Zhu Xi (朱熹), “Juan 2: Li Ren,” *Si shu zhang ju ji zhu* (四書章句集注) [*Collected Commentaries on the Four Books*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983), 69.

<sup>51</sup> Zhu Xi, “Juan 3: Yong Yie,” *Si Shu Zhang Ju Ji Zhu*, 92.

<sup>52</sup> Zhu Xi, “Juan 4: Shu Et,” *Si Shu Zhang Ju Ji Zhu*, 100.

system that evolved into a comprehensive set of social and moral orders.<sup>53</sup> Building on the concept of “affirmation of human status” that emerged during the Zhou Dynasty, Confucius developed a theory grounded in humanistic principles. This represents a significant innovation in Confucius’s theoretical framework.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to Confucius, another prominent Confucian scholar, Mencius (孟子, 372 BC-289 BC), also explored human nature and the human heart. Mencius advocated that “everyone has the heart to be intolerant of others”<sup>55</sup> and emphasized that people’s empathy for others is innate, suggesting that humans are born with a fundamentally good nature. In emergencies, without any regard for personal interests, individuals will naturally feel sympathy and compassion due to their inherent “unbearable heart.” This awareness of kindness arises without any presupposition; it is a manifestation of original human intent.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, Mencius elaborated on Confucius's concept of benevolence, asserting that benevolence is the original intention of human beings. Human nature can achieve the state of a gentleman because benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are deeply rooted in the heart.<sup>57</sup>

Mencius’s theory of human nature as inherently good contrasts with Xunzi’s (荀子, 313BC-238BC) theory of human nature as inherently evil. Mencius argued that while humans are born with a good nature, external influences can lead to destructive behaviors and habits. Xunzi, on the other hand, believed that human nature contains both good and evil,

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<sup>53</sup> Lao Szekwang (勞思光), 新編中國哲學史 — (*New Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy, Volume 1*) (Kweilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2005), 54-5.

<sup>54</sup> Lao Szekwang, *New Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy, Volume 1*, 77-8.

<sup>55</sup> Zhu Xi, “Men zhi ji zhu juan 3: Gong sun chou zhang ju shang,” *Si shu zhang ju ji zhu*, 237.

<sup>56</sup> Kao Poyuan, “‘One Principle, Many Manifestations’ and Self-negation: The Confucian Reflection on Foundation of Bioethics,” *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture* 38, no.2 (2011), 41. Accessed March 11, 2025. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7065/MRPC.201102.0039>.

<sup>57</sup> “Mencius said, ‘Benevolence is the heart of humanity, and righteousness is the guiding principle of human conduct.’” from: Zhu Xi, “Men zhi ji zhu juan 11: Gao zi zhang ju shang,” *Si shu zhang ju ji zhu*, 333. “The inherent nature of a virtuous person is rooted in the heart through benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom.” from: Zhu Xi, “Men zhi ji zhu juan 13: Jin xin zhang ju shang,” *Si shu zhang ju ji zhu*, 355.

necessitating acquired learning to prevent the evil in nature from overpowering the good and causing people to act immorally. Despite their differences, both scholars upheld the Confucian belief that people must cultivate kindness and adhere to benevolence and righteousness. This combination of human nature and the will of the heart represents the highest ideal within Confucian theory.

In comparing Mencius's and Xunzi's perspectives on the relationship between desire and the mind, Mencius views human nature as inherently noble, emphasizing the distinctions between humans and animals,<sup>58</sup> whereas Xunzi regards humans and animals as essentially equivalent.<sup>59</sup> Whether focusing on the differences or similarities between humans and animals, both scholars approach the issue from a dualistic perspective, discussing the topic through a single lens—either by distinguishing or equating the two. Despite their differing approaches, Mencius and Xunzi share similar views on the impact of desire on the mind. Mencius believed that moderate desires could aid in cultivating the mind.<sup>60</sup> Xunzi, while emphasizing the inherent evil in human nature, also discussed how unchecked desires pose a threat to benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom:

Human nature is inherently inclined toward self-interest. If we simply follow this nature, competition will arise, and courtesy will disappear. People are born with tendencies toward harmful behaviors; if unchecked, thieves and robbers will emerge, and loyalty and trust will vanish. Humans also have natural desires for sensory gratification. If we indulge these impulses, immorality will ensue, and etiquette and morality will disintegrate. Left unchecked, human nature would lead to contention and disorder, disrupting the rational structure of society and resulting in violence.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> “What distinguishes humans from animals is very slight. The common people may lose it, but the gentleman preserves it.” From: Zhu Xi, “Men zhi ji zhu juan 8: Li Lou Zhang Ju Xia,” *Si shu zhang ju ji zhu*, 293.

<sup>59</sup> Wei-Chieh Tseng, “The Meaning, Origin and Transformation of Mencius and Xunzi's Distinction Between Human and Animal,” *Studies in Sinology* 42 (September 2020), 7-8. Accessed October 22, 2024. DOI : 10.6238/SIS.202009\_(42-2).01.

<sup>60</sup> Zhu Xi, “Men Zhi Ji Zhu Juan 14: Jin Xin Zhang Ju Xia,” *Si shu zhang ju ji zhu*, 374.

<sup>61</sup> Xun Zi, Yong Fang and Po Li, trans and eds., *Xun zi* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2011), 375.

Regarding desire, although it is inherent in human nature, Xunzi argued that this does not justify allowing its unchecked development simply because it exists from birth. He acknowledged the legitimacy of desires related to human physiological needs, including sensual desires.<sup>62</sup> However, he also emphasized the importance of etiquette and justice, whose purpose is to maintain social order. Therefore, Xunzi argued that human nature should not be followed blindly. Virtuous individuals understand how to utilize “artificiality”—deliberate, conscious action—to reflect on and regulate desires, ensuring that they do not dominate or corrupt human nature.

With respect to the discussion of the relationship between the human-made and the natural, the following two paragraphs further elaborate on Xunzi’s ideas in greater detail:

Human nature, in its original state, is simple and pure. Artificial refinement has its own attributes, characterized by complexity and flourishing. Without the foundation of nature, human-made enhancements cannot be applied; yet without human cultivation, nature cannot by itself develop into an ideal or refined state.<sup>63</sup>

Human nature is inherent at birth; emotion stems from the essence of this nature, and desire arises as a response to emotion.<sup>64</sup>

Human nature is inherently pure, akin to unblemished jade, but it is inevitably influenced by external factors. Thus, where do human desires originate? They are essentially reflections of emotions. The impact of external factors on human nature manifests as desires aimed at fulfilling physiological needs.

Integrating the perspectives of the three foundational Confucian scholars—Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi—their theoretical views on human nature and desire share a common emphasis on the inherent nature of desire. They all highlight the importance of managing desire rather than allowing it to dominate human nature. Confucianism is one of the two

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<sup>62</sup> Xun Zi, Yong Fang and Po Li, trans and eds., *Xun zi*, 45.

<sup>63</sup> Xun Zi, Yong Fang and Po Li, trans and eds., *Xun zi*, 313.

<sup>64</sup> Xun Zi, Yong Fang and Po Li, trans and eds., *Xun zi* 369.

principal pillars of Chinese philosophy. It is also essential to examine Daoism's perspectives on human nature and desire.

The founder of Daoist theory, Laozi (老子, circa 6th century BCE), was likely a contemporary of Confucius. Historical records suggest that Confucius once sought knowledge and rituals from Laozi.<sup>65</sup> The primary distinction between their philosophies lies in their treatment of morality. Confucianism emphasizes the conscious correction of morals and adherence to orthodoxy, advocating for an active engagement with societal norms. In contrast, Daoism advocates for “naturalness” (自然) and “inaction” (無為). In response to the political chaos of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, Laozi focused on how to cultivate the goodness and greatness of life by returning to the lost “Dao” as the core of his theoretical inquiry.<sup>66</sup> During these turbulent times, while Confucianism promoted an active “engagement with the world” (入世), Daoism preferred an individual approach of “transcendence” (出世) for personal recuperation:

All things arise from the Dao. Once born, each thing acquires its own inherent nature and is nurtured by virtue. Following the acquisition of its nature, an object takes on a specific form. The formation and development of objects are subsequently influenced and constrained by their surrounding environment. Among these stages, the Dao and virtue are fundamental. Without the Dao, there would be no origin for things; without virtue, there would be no inherent nature for things.<sup>67</sup>

The Dao represents the essence of all things in the universe. Laozi emphasized the intrinsic connection between the Dao, virtue, and nature. Virtue is derived from the Dao, and

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<sup>65</sup> “Laozi, originally from Qu Renli in the county of Ku, Chu, was named Er and styled Dan, belonging to the Li clan. He served as the keeper of the archives during the Zhou Dynasty. When Confucius traveled to the Zhou to inquire about rituals, he sought out Laozi for guidance.” Kametaro Takigawa (瀧川龜太郎), Lu Shixian (魯實先), and Chen Zhi (陳直), “老子韓非列傳第三 (Biography of Laozi and Han Fei, Chapter 3),” *史記會注考證 [Collected Annotations and Studies on the Shiji]* (Taipei: Hong Publishing House (洪氏出版社), 1983), 853-4. However, the biography of Laozi recorded in the *Shi ji* (史記) has been critiqued by numerous scholars for containing contradictions and ambiguities. For related debates, please refer to Volume Four of *Discussions on Ancient History* (古史辨) by Gu Jiegang (顧頡剛, 1893-1980).

<sup>66</sup> Yuan Baoxin, *老子哲學之詮釋與重建 [Interpretation and reconstruction of Laozi's philosophy]* (Taipei: Wenchin Publishing Co. (文津出版社), 1991), 91.

<sup>67</sup> Laozi, Zhangping Tang (湯漳平) and Zhaohua Wang (王朝華) ed., “Chapter 51,” *Laozi* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, July 2014), 205-6.

metaphysical virtue can be internalized into life, thereby manifesting as what is termed nature.

The law of heaven is articulated as: “Man follows the earth, the earth follows heaven, heaven follows Dao, and Dao follows nature.”<sup>68</sup> Human nature adheres to the principles of the Dao, where the so-called principle of the Dao is “nature.” A more detailed explanation of this concept is: “The respect for the Dao and the nobility of virtue arise because they do not impose or control.”<sup>69</sup> Laozi asserts that the nature of the Dao is indeed nature itself, characterized by “inaction” or non-deliberate action. This implies that both human nature and the Dao, are in a state of quietude and purity. By embracing simplicity and natural essence, individuals seek tranquility amid the chaos of the world.

When pursuing peace, what attitude should we adopt when facing desire?:

The five colors and five sounds can overwhelm the senses, while the five flavors can diminish one’s sensitivity to taste. The exhilaration of hunting can lead to obsession, and encountering unfamiliar objects can be a source of distraction. Consequently, the sage lives a simple and tranquil life, prioritizing inner spiritual peace over the pursuit of external material desires.<sup>70</sup>

Implementing the core principle of “natural inaction,” external desires are seen as disturbances to the tranquility of the human heart; therefore, one should not forsake the pursuit of inner spiritual fulfillment to satisfy these desires. Additionally, individuals must learn to find contentment within themselves: “The greatest misfortune lies in being perpetually dissatisfied; the most significant fault is an insatiable desire for more.”<sup>71</sup> Laozi’s explanation of desire asserts that cunning and deceitful desires functioning within the mind should be restrained and eliminated. While acknowledging that people have instinctive and natural desires, Laozi criticizes deliberate desires related to psychological pursuits, such as

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<sup>68</sup> Laozi, “Chapter 25,” *Laozi*, 95.

<sup>69</sup> Laozi, “Chapter 51” *Laozi*, 206.

<sup>70</sup> Laozi, “Chapter 12,” *Laozi*, 45.

<sup>71</sup> Laozi, “Chapter 46,” *Laozi*, 181-2.

the pursuit of material and sensory stimulation. These pursuits are seen as obstacles to achieving a state of “desire-free tranquility” (虛靜). Laozi’s concept of “emptiness and tranquility” (無欲) also correlates with the idea of being “desire-free:”

‘Void’ (虛) refers to a state in which the mind is empty and free from prejudice. ‘Quiet’ (靜) denotes a state of calmness, characterized by a lack of impulsive reactions and an absence of disturbance from external chaos. ‘Fu-Ming’ (復命) signifies a return to a state of desire-free nature.<sup>72</sup>

Living in the world with a serene and undisturbed mind, while aligning with the natural movements and principles of the metaphysical Way of Heaven, represents the highest state according to Laozi’s teachings. It is not that people are to be devoid of desires, but rather that they should address these desires in accordance with the natural and non-interfering Way. Otherwise, the mind will remain unsettled and will fail to achieve its original, pure, and transparent state.

“The Dao generates the One, the One generates the Two, the Two generates the Three, and the Three generates all things.”<sup>73</sup> Continuing Laozi’s theory, Zhuangzi also affirmed that the Dao is the metaphysical root of all things. He asserted that “silence, tranquility, solitude, and inaction are the foundation of heaven and earth and the ultimate expression of Dao and virtue.”<sup>74</sup> According to Zhuangzi, the characteristics of Dao are quietude and inactivity, representing the highest embodiment of morality. He uses the metaphor of *qi* to provide an in-depth description of the state of spiritual tranquility:

Yan Hui asked, “Excuse me, what is the fasting of the heart?” Confucius replied, “It is to listen with a single-minded and unified heart, not merely using the ears to listen, but engaging the heart, and not only listening with the heart but also employing the

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<sup>72</sup> Laozi, “Chapter 16,” *Laozi*, 61.

<sup>73</sup> Laozi, “Chapter 42,” *Laozi*, 166.

<sup>74</sup> Zhuangzi; edited by Xianqian Wang, “天道第十三,” in *Zhuangzi’s Collection and Explanation* Vol. 1 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1935), 74.

*qi*. . . . . Only by following the inclusiveness of the void can one be in harmony with the way of heaven. Such a state represents the fasting of the heart.”<sup>75</sup>

“*Qi* is fundamentally a metaphor for a specific state of the heart, distinct from the purely physiological concept of *qi* as described by Laozi.”<sup>76</sup> However, it is consistent with Laozi’s theory that the mind must remain tranquil and empty.<sup>77</sup> The following nature is the state of following the Dao.

For a pure mind, when facing desires, Zhuangzi emphasizes the cultivation of a quiet mind is “To thoroughly eliminate ambition, clarify internal errors, shed moral burdens, and remove obstacles to truth.”<sup>78</sup> Based on Laozi’s theory of dissolving desires and achieving contentment, Zhuangzi delineated a total of twenty-four factors that may disturb the human heart. In distinguishing these various types, Zhuangzi emphasized that the human heart must remain upright in order to attain emptiness and tranquility, ultimately advancing to the state of inaction associated with the Dao. Integrating the theories of Laozi and Zhuangzi, the former advocates for desire-free indifference to eliminate desires, while the latter emphasizes purifying the heart to achieve emptiness, clarity, and tranquility. Both philosophies posit that freedom from desire in the heart is essential for pursuing the spiritual realm.

A summary of the characteristics of Confucianism and Daoism in the pre-Qin period reveals that Confucianism prioritizes the way of kingly rule, which combines virtue with the benevolence and righteousness of the political system. In contrast, Daoism places greater emphasis on the “transcendent realm” of the natural way of heaven.<sup>79</sup> In terms of their

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<sup>75</sup> Zhuangzi, “人間世第四,” in *Zhuangzi’s Collection and Explanation Vol. 1*, 23.

<sup>76</sup> Xu Fuguan, *History of Human Nature in China: Pre-Qin Chapter* (Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore Co.,Ltd, 2001), 343.

<sup>77</sup> The so-called tranquil and empty mind is metaphorically compared to a mirror by Zhuangzi. “An empty and clear state of mind resembles a mirror, aligning itself with nature. It neither intentionally welcomes nor dismisses the external flow of events, nor does it harbor personal intentions. Thus, it can genuinely reflect the essence of things without being tarnished by external influences.” Zhuangzi, “卷二內篇：應帝王第七,” in *Zhuangzi’s Collection and Explanation Vol. 1*, 49.

<sup>78</sup> Zhuangzi, “卷六外篇雜篇：庚桑楚第二十三,” in *Zhuangzi’s Collection and Explanation Vol. 2*, 40.

<sup>79</sup> Lao Szekwang, *Xinbian Zhongguo Zhexue Shi Vol. 1*, 56.

perspectives on human nature and desires, both Confucianism and Daoism can be said to share similar views regarding the inherent purity of human nature.

During the Han Dynasty, Confucianism underwent significant developments, including the influence of *chen-wei* (讖緯, prophecy), *the debates between modern and ancient scriptures* (今古文經之爭), and the integration of *yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽) theories. Similarly, Daoism emerged from *the Teachings of Huang-Lao* (黃老之學), incorporating elements of witchcraft, alchemy, and beliefs in spirits and deities. It can be argued that both Confucianism and Daoism were ‘transformed’ into distinct forms during this period. However, it is inaccurate to assert that Confucian scholars and alchemists are the rightful heirs of these two schools of thought. From the Qin to the Han Dynasties, it would be more appropriate to state that the classical doctrines had deteriorated between the Qin and the Han dynasties.”<sup>80</sup> The renowned philosopher Lao Sze-Kwang bluntly stated that there was a “decline of Han Confucianism” and a “dismemberment of Daoist thought.” By this time, the influence of *Yin-Yang* theory and Huang-Lao’s teachings had contributed significantly to the extreme decline of both Confucianism and Daoism.<sup>81</sup> To understand the changes in Confucianism during the Han Dynasty, it is essential to focus on the representative figure of Han Confucianism, Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, 179BC-104BC), and his *theory of the relationship between heaven and humanity* (天人感應說, *tianren-ganying*). Dong Zhongshu’s explanation of this relationship, as well as his views on political kingship, are deeply rooted in the concepts of *yin* and *yang* and the five elements (陰陽五行). For example:

The fundamental principle governing the movement of heaven is the interplay between *yin* and *yang*. *Yang* symbolizes the benevolence of heaven, while *yin*

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<sup>80</sup> Such critiques, like Gu Jiegang (顧頡剛)’s discussion in *The Fangshi and Confucian Scholars of the Qin and Han Dynasties* (秦漢的方士與儒生), analyze how classical studies became an instrument of imperial control during the Han dynasty. His work also includes observations on the evolution of both Confucian and Daoist thought. Jiegang Gu, *The Fangshi and Confucian Scholars of the Qin and Han Dynasties* (Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2005).

<sup>81</sup> Lao SzeKwang, *Xinbian Zhongguo Zhexue Shi Vol. 2*, 16-25.

represents its punitive aspects.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, if a ruler wishes to achieve meaningful action, they should seek their foundation in the principles of the heavenly way. The ultimate truth of the heavenly way lies in the interplay of *yin* and *yang*. *Yang* represents virtue, while *yin* signifies punishment. Punishment governs death, whereas virtue governs life. Consequently, *yang* is consistently present in the height of summer, focusing on nurturing and growth, while *yin* predominates in the depths of winter, accumulating in empty, unused spaces. From this, it is evident that the heavenly mandate favors the employment of virtue rather than punishment.<sup>83</sup>

By integrating the natural movement of the sun with the principles of *yin* and *yang* to elucidate the laws of heaven, this represents a significant transformation of both the Confucian concepts of benevolence and righteousness and the Daoist notion of heaven. Specifically, it redirects traditional Confucian teachings in a manner that has been criticized and deemed unorthodox and distorted.<sup>84</sup>

The innovation of Confucian thought by Han Confucians also encompassed discussions of nature based on *qi*. Wang Chong's "Three Grades of Nature Theory" integrated *qi* theory into Confucian discourse:

Humans receive primordial *qi* from Heaven, and each person is allotted their fate of longevity or early death, thereby determining the form and duration of their life.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Dong Zhongshu, Wang Xinzhan (王心湛) ed., "陰陽義," *Chunqiu fanlu jijie* (春秋繁露集解) [Collected Exegesis of Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals] (Shanghai: Guangyi Publishing (廣益書局), 1936), 108.

<sup>83</sup> Bang Ku (班固), Bang Chao (班昭), "Juan 56: [Biography of Dong Zhongshu] Dong Zhongshu Zhuan (董仲舒傳) No. 26," *Hanshu yibaiershi juan* (漢書一百二十卷) [The Book of Han in 120 Volumes] (Ming 嘉靖間 (1522-1566) 德藩最樂軒刊本), 1419-20. National Central Library. Accessed July 24, 2024. [https://rbook.ncl.edu.tw/NCLSearch/Search/SearchDetail?item=e3c2c4df9f1b4f9f9bcbf930718b7641fDMYnJYxMQ2.IXj9t5gD7TXjTut753YZuGVAC9BbjCT7eY\\_KXUIxYpo&page=&whereString=&sourceWhereString=&SourceID=0&HasImage=](https://rbook.ncl.edu.tw/NCLSearch/Search/SearchDetail?item=e3c2c4df9f1b4f9f9bcbf930718b7641fDMYnJYxMQ2.IXj9t5gD7TXjTut753YZuGVAC9BbjCT7eY_KXUIxYpo&page=&whereString=&sourceWhereString=&SourceID=0&HasImage=)

<sup>84</sup> "Confucius authored the *Spring and Autumn Annals* to align with the way of Heaven while assessing human emotions. He drew from antiquity and examined the present; thus, the criticisms found within the *Spring and Autumn Annals* correspond to the disasters inflicted upon society, while the actions condemned within it relate to anomalies and aberrations. By documenting the faults of states and families alongside the changes brought about by disasters, he illustrates the extent of human actions and their moral implications, which resonate with the natural order of heaven and earth. This, too, reflects a dimension of the divine." This passage profoundly illustrates how Dong Zhongshu forcefully integrates Confucius's authorship of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* with the notion of the correspondence between heaven and humanity. He attributes the reason for Confucius's authorship to the aim of elucidating the changes in disasters, thereby explaining the interconnected relationship between heaven and humanity. This aspect has drawn significant criticism from later Confucian scholars and intellectuals. Ku Pang, "Juan 56: 董仲舒傳 No. 26," *Han Shu Yi Bai Er Shi Juan*, 1427.

<sup>85</sup> Wang Chong (王充), Suhuan Gao ed., *Lun hen* (論衡) (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1947), 5.

Humanity's good and evil originates from the same vital *qi*.<sup>86</sup> The quantity of this *qi* determines the intelligence or foolishness of one's character.<sup>87</sup>

I believe that Mencius's assertion of the inherent goodness of human nature primarily applies to those of above-average character, while Xunzi's view of human nature as inherently evil is directed toward those of below-average character. In contrast, Yang Xiong posits that human nature is a mixture of both good and evil, categorizing such individuals as average.<sup>88</sup>

Wang Chong's theory has been critiqued for its extensive criticism of Han Confucianism, while simultaneously containing contradictory arguments that are often perceived as confusing and incomplete.<sup>89</sup>

Such changes continued into the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, ushering in the development of "metaphysics" (玄學) and transforming traditional Chinese Confucianism and Daoism. In an era marked by political turbulence and continuous warfare, metaphysical thought emerged as a new perspective, particularly regarding human desires. During the Eastern Jin Dynasty, metaphysics converged with Buddhism. In the context of human nature, the metaphysical perspective on rational desire builds upon Wang Chong's theories, as exemplified in *Ren wu zhi* (人物志) [*The Treatise on Personalities*]:

The essence of humanity derives from emotions and temperament..... All beings with flesh and blood contain a fundamental vital energy as their essence, which, through the interplay of *yin* and *yang*, shapes their temperament and manifests in the five elements that constitute their form. As long as there is a physical body, one can directly explore its essence.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Wang Chong, Hue Huang ed., *Lun hen jiao shi* (論衡校釋) (Taipei: The Commercial Press, 1935), 75.

<sup>87</sup> Wang Chong, Suhuan Gao ed., *Lun Hen*, 5.

<sup>88</sup> Wang Chong, Su Huan Gao ed., *Lun Hen*, 21.

<sup>89</sup> Xu Fuguan (徐復觀), "[The Characteristics of Wang Chong's Scholarly Thought] 王充學術思想的特點," *Intellectual History of the Two Han Dynasties: Juan 2* (兩漢思想史卷二) (Taipei: Student Book CO., Ltd., 2019), 582.

<sup>90</sup> Liu Shao (劉邵), "九徵 (Nine Appeals)," *Renwuzhi juan shang* (人物志卷上) [*The Treatise on Personalities Volume I*] (Shanghai: 顧定芳刊本, 1529), 9-10. Accessed September 29, 2024.

[https://rbook.ncl.edu.tw/NCLSearch/Search/SearchDetail?item=f7489d3979164a7a97a5ceae13f267c3fDU1NjE1MA2.NjybLB8CsAkaDEteqhn8GDQINH9YtyjnKjLvQ4T0528\\_&page=&whereString=YW5kICggIEhhe0ltYWdlIGluICgnMCCsICcxJywgJycpIGFuZCAoVG10bGVfTWfPbiBsaWtlICcl5Lq654mp5b-X](https://rbook.ncl.edu.tw/NCLSearch/Search/SearchDetail?item=f7489d3979164a7a97a5ceae13f267c3fDU1NjE1MA2.NjybLB8CsAkaDEteqhn8GDQINH9YtyjnKjLvQ4T0528_&page=&whereString=YW5kICggIEhhe0ltYWdlIGluICgnMCCsICcxJywgJycpIGFuZCAoVG10bGVfTWfPbiBsaWtlICcl5Lq654mp5b-X).

Discussing human nature in relation to *qi*, this perspective emphasizes the method of “knowing the inside from the outside and recognizing the hidden from the obvious.” By observing the external appearance of individuals, we can infer their inner temperament, which corresponds to the hidden *qi*. “The wood bones, metal tendons, fire essence, earth flesh, and water blood represent five elemental symbols. Each of these elements has its own significance.”<sup>91</sup> Liu Shao (劉邵) compared the Confucian Five Constants with the concepts of *yin* and *yang* and the Five Elements, extending these comparisons to encompass human character and ability. At that time, the standards for evaluating character were still closely intertwined with traditional Confucian moral values.

Before it merged with Buddhist thought, the integration of Confucianism and Daoism was reflected in Wang Bi’s (王弼) notable work, “Laozi zhi lue (老子指略),” which serves as an annotation of the Laozi:

The focus should be on preventing the populace from generating unnecessary desires, rather than attacking their malevolent actions. Thus, allowing people to witness a simple life, in order to reject the wisdom of the sages, and reducing personal desires to abandon clever gains.<sup>92</sup>

Wang Bi’s annotations on the Laozi not only demonstrate a comparative understanding of Laozi’s thoughts through the lens of the Confucian concepts of benevolence and righteousness, but also underscore the significance of eliminating selfish desires—a point emphasized by both Confucianism and Daoism.

*Chingtan* (清談) became popular during the Wei and Jin Dynasties, rooted in the unease stemming from war and chaos. In these troubled times, people sought peace of mind through a detached and indifferent attitude. Represented by *the Seven Sages of the Bamboo*

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<sup>91</sup> Liu Shao, “九徵 (Nine Appeals),” *Renwuzhi juan shang*, 11.

<sup>92</sup> Wang Bi (王弼), Lou Yulie (樓宇烈) ed., “Laozi zhi lue jiyi (老子指略輯佚),” *Laozi daodejing zhu jiao shi* (老子道德經注校釋) [*Annotations, Collation, and Exegesis of the Laozi Daodejing*] (Taipei: Chung Hwu Book Co., Ltd., 2008), 198.

*Grove* (竹林七賢), “They proclaimed the primacy of ‘naturalness’ over man-made rules whose futility was evident in the corrupt society around them.”<sup>93</sup> This skepticism regarding social norms and morality contributed to the in-depth development of theories at the spiritual level, allowing for the exploration of human nature to extend beyond traditional mainstream Confucian views.

*The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove*, including Ruan Ji (阮籍), Ji Kang (嵇康), Shan Tao (山濤), Liu Ling (劉伶), Ruan Xian (阮咸), Xiang Xiu (向秀), and Wang Rong (王戎), drew upon Daoist metaphysical philosophy as the foundation of their thoughts and exemplified a distinct attitude of seclusion and detachment from the world. They are collectively known as the seven sages who lived in seclusion in the bamboo forest.<sup>94</sup> The attitude of “transcending the Confucian ethical codes and following nature” (越名教而任自然) was representative of the period from Cao Wei to the early Western Jin Dynasty. Mingjiao (名教) refers to the traditional Confucian ethics; nature refers to the Daoist attitude of natural inaction. In the face of war and political instability, intellectuals are tired of Confucian orthodoxy and moral restraint and yearn for the free attitude of Daoism; more importantly, they yearn for the freedom to express their own ideas.<sup>95</sup> Such an attitude towards life stems from Ji Kang’s “Reflection on Self-discipline” (釋私論), which means transcending the constraints of secular ethics and allowing the development of nature:

Due to the absence of vanity in their heart, they are able to transcend conventional norms and follow the natural way; because their emotions are not constrained by desires, they can accurately discern the value of things and understand the principles governing all existence.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Arthur F Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 30.

<sup>94</sup> Zhang Longxi, “Another Wave of Intellectual Excitement: The Wei-Jin Period,” in *A History of Chinese Literature*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2023), 60. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003164173-4>.

<sup>95</sup> Zhang Longxi, “Another Wave of Intellectual Excitement: The Wei-Jin Period,” in *A History of Chinese Literature*, 51.

<sup>96</sup> Ji Kang (嵇康), “Juan Six: 釋私論,” *Ji zhongsan ji* (嵇中散集) [*Collected Works of Ji Zhongsan*] (Si Chuan: 江安傅氏雙鑑樓藏明嘉靖刊本, 1525), 1.

This theory may appear free-spirited and capricious; however, the principle of “let nature take its course” still adheres to a certain trajectory. Aligning with the Daoist concept of the Way of Heaven, individuals regard the Way of Heaven as their ideal and strive to achieve goals that are in harmony with it, without excessive pretense or hypocrisy.

How can one achieve “naturalness”? Ji Kang argues that the ideal gentleman should be able to transcend the emotions of joy, sorrow, love, and hate, reaching a state of transcendent tranquility.<sup>97</sup> On the other word, reach to the level that “pure and peaceful, less selfish and with fewer desires.”<sup>98</sup> One should not be dominated by desires; only in this way can one achieve “*shen* preservation” (養生), a noble state of spiritual tranquility and serenity.

Another renowned figure among the Seven Sages, Ruan Ji, advocated for transcending conventional ethics in favor of pursuing a more authentic connection with nature:

The essence of supreme virtue actually resides in seeking nothing external. When the balance of nature is stable and adheres to its principles, maintaining purity and tranquility, remaining open and void while awaiting the right moment, good and evil become indistinguishable, and disputes over right and wrong cease. Consequently, all things return to their essence and attain their true nature.<sup>99</sup>

In this article, which is based on Zhuangzi’s *Theory of Equality of Things* (齊物論), Ruan further develops the idea of respecting nature according to the concept of *wuwei* (無為) in Zhuangzi’s theory. This notion is similarly articulated in Ruan’s 大人先生傳 [*Biography of the Master*]. “Therefore, without a ruler, all things can achieve stability; without ministers, all

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<sup>97</sup> Ji Kang, “卷第三: 養生論,” *Ji Zhong San Ji*, 3-4. “Therefore, the gentleman understands that the body relies on the existence of the spirit, while the spirit requires the body for sustenance. Recognizing that the essence of life is easily lost and that a single mistake can cause harm, they cultivate their character to protect the spirit and stabilize their mindset to maintain physical health. They no longer become ensnared by feelings of love and hatred, nor do they linger in thoughts of sorrow and joy. By remaining calm and unaffected, the internal energy becomes harmonious. Additionally, through regulating their breathing and diet, they nourish the body, allowing the physical form and spirit to draw closer together, creating a complementary balance between the inner and outer self.”

<sup>98</sup> Kang Ji, “卷第三: 養生論,” *Ji Zhong San Ji*, 5.

<sup>99</sup> Ruan Ji (阮籍), “達莊論,” *Ruan bubin ji* (阮步兵集) (Shanhua: 章氏經濟堂, 1892), 42.

affairs can be successfully organized. Only by cultivating oneself and adhering to discipline can longevity be attained.”<sup>100</sup> This article examines the Sima regime and the political turmoil of the Wei and Jin Dynasties as a backdrop for Ruan Ji’s belief that the restraining power of etiquette and law in society has vanished, which contributes to his pessimistic outlook. In an era characterized by chaotic political conditions etiquette appears to have become a tool for those in power to control the populace; Ruan Ji posits that the way of heaven seems to be the only remaining standard for social order. The ideal discussions of personality and character by Ruan Ji and Ji Kang exhibit similarities: both regard Daoist natural inaction as the norm.

The development of China’s intellectual history during the Wei and Jin Dynasties reveals that the two primary schools of Confucianism and Daoism each held prominence, while their mutual influence grew, albeit amidst turmoil and change. With the evolution of the political landscape and China’s foreign relations, Buddhism began to emerge in the context of Chinese intellectual history, significantly impacting the connotation and transmission of Chinese thought. Examining the theories of human nature and desires within Confucianism and Daoism, it appears that although the Wei and Jin Dynasties gravitated toward a *laissez-faire* approach, Daoism continues to advocate for naturalness and purity of the soul. It can be asserted that desire is not deemed essential; simultaneously, while its negative impacts are acknowledged, individuals who experience desire are not subject to criticism.

### *1.2. Ideological Conflicts and Developments Brought About by Buddhist Concepts*

*Han Dharma Bennei Zhuan* (漢法本內傳) documents the activities of Kasyapa Matanga (伽葉摩騰) and other monks who traveled to China to engage in discussions about Buddhism at the renowned White Horse Temple. This marked the beginning of the journey of

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<sup>100</sup> Ruan Ji, “大人先生傳”, *Ruan Bu Bin Ji*, 48.

the Tianzhu (天竺, nowadays' India) people's to China.<sup>101</sup> Prior to this, Buddhism began to be introduced along commercial routes from the Indo-Iranian and Serindian kingdoms of Central Asia, starting from Chang'an, Luoyang, Shandong, Anhui, and other regions.<sup>102</sup> The routes can be classified into two types: a land route traversing Central Asia to the Xinjiang region and a maritime route passing through Sri Lanka, Java, the Malay Peninsula, and Vietnam across the South China Sea to Guangzhou.<sup>103</sup> Thus, the introduction of Buddhism to China can be traced back to the period when Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (漢武帝, 141-87 BC) opened the Silk Road to the Western Regions. It was during the era of Emperor Ming of the Han Dynasty (漢明帝, 58-75 AD) that individuals from Tianzhu began to arrive in China to disseminate their teachings. The initial dissemination of Buddhism in China is attributed to the monk An Shigao (安世高), who arrived during the Jianhe reign of Emperor Huan of the Han Dynasty (漢桓帝, 146-168 AD).<sup>104</sup>

In the early stages of contact between Buddhism and China, the societal and cultural contexts of the Han Dynasty differed significantly from those of India, where Buddhism originated. This initial phase presented challenges for Buddhism, necessitating adaptation to Chinese culture as a primary concern.<sup>105</sup> Consequently, the translation of Buddhist texts commenced, effectively enhancing the understanding and propagation of Buddhism in China. Key translators during this period included Kumarajiva (鳩羅摩什, 344-413), Zhenyi (真諦, 499-569), Xuanzang (玄奘, 602-664), and Fu Kong (不空, 705-774).<sup>106</sup> Under Kumarajiva's leadership, the translation efforts were predominantly influenced by the Indian Buddhist

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<sup>101</sup> Jiang Weiqiao (蔣維喬), 中國佛教史: 中華現代學術名著叢書: 120年紀念版 [*History of Chinese Buddhism (Chinese Modern Academic Masterpiece Series: 120th Anniversary Commemorative Edition)*] (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2017), 4.

<sup>102</sup> Arthur F Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, 32.

<sup>103</sup> Fang Litian, "Buddhism's introduction into China and its change and development" in *Chinese Buddhism and Traditional Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 27.

<sup>104</sup> Jiang Weiqiao, *History of Chinese Buddhism*, 6.

<sup>105</sup> Arthur F Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, 10.

<sup>106</sup> Jiang Weiqiao, *History of Chinese Buddhism*, 7.

schools of *Nagarjuna* (龍樹) and *Deva* (提婆),<sup>107</sup> leading to the dominance of *Mahayana Buddhism* (大乘空宗佛教) in China.<sup>108</sup>

Through translation, the specialized vocabulary of Buddhism was conveyed in a manner that reflected the translators' intentions and utilized language familiar to Chinese speakers, thereby facilitating comprehension.<sup>109</sup> This significantly contributed to the dissemination of the teachings' core meanings. Huiyuan (惠遠, 334-416) of the Eastern Jin Dynasty further advanced the dialogue between Buddhism and Chinese Confucianism. By promoting Buddhist doctrines and authoring articles, he advocated for the "Combination of Confucianism and Buddhism," addressing the doctrinal conflicts between the two traditions.<sup>110</sup> Thanks to the efforts of these monks, Buddhism was able to widely disseminate its teachings through both oral transmission and written texts, aiming for integration with Confucianism rather than outright replacement. This approach fostered a gentle and harmonious expansion of Buddhism's influence.

*The five precepts* (五戒) are essential concepts when discussing Buddhist teachings and human desires in detail:

So, what are the five fears and resentments? If the fear arises from the karmic consequences of killing, then by abandoning killing, the fear corresponding to that karmic consequence will cease. If the fear arises from the karmic consequences of stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and drinking alcohol, then by abandoning stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and drinking, the corresponding fears will also dissipate. This is what is referred to as the tranquility that arises from overcoming the five fears and resentments due to karma.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> These translations include: *Amitabha Buddhist Scriptures*, *Pancavimsatisa-hasrikaprajnaparamita*, *Astahasrika-prajnaparamita*, *Saddharmapundarikasutra*, *Vimalakirti*, *The Diamond Sutra*, *Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra*, *Sata-sastra*, *Madhyamika-sastra*, *Dvadashanikaya-Shastra*, and *Satyasiddhi-sastra*. Litian Fang, "Buddhism's introduction into China and its change and development" in *Chinese Buddhism and Traditional Culture*, 32.

<sup>108</sup> Jiang Weiqiao, *History of Chinese Buddhism*, 15.

<sup>109</sup> Arthur F Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, 36.

<sup>110</sup> Fang Litian, "Buddhism's introduction into China and its change and development" in *Chinese Buddhism and Traditional Culture*, 32.

<sup>111</sup> (Southern Dynasty Song) Shikshananda (釋求那跋陀羅), *Samyukta Āgama* (雜阿含經) (Qing 光緒十至十

The five precepts, such as “No killing, no theft, no prostitution, no nonsense, and no drinking,” restrict the behaviour and speech of the monks. In particular, “no prostitution” strictly restricts erotic and lewd behavior. Analyzed from the perspective of combining Confucianism and Buddhism:

Buddhist scriptures outline five prohibitions, while Confucian classics emphasize the values of benevolence, righteousness, etiquette, wisdom, and trust. These two frameworks can correspond to one another: benevolence corresponds to the prohibition against killing; righteousness corresponds to the prohibition against stealing; etiquette corresponds to the prohibition against evil and sycophancy; wisdom corresponds to the prohibition against drinking; and faith corresponds to the prohibition against falsehood.<sup>112</sup>

Yan Zhitui (顏之推, 531-591) of the Tang Dynasty compared the five precepts of Buddhism with the five cardinal virtues of Confucianism, concluding that there is interoperability between the two systems. He suggested that etiquette corresponds to the prohibition against prostitution, categorizing prostitution as a behavior that contravenes the established etiquette system. This perspective reflects a negative connotation of prostitution, whether derived from Buddhist or Confucian teachings.

Meditation within the Three Practices of Buddhism—precept (戒), meditation (定), and wisdom (慧)—illustrates the concept of abstaining from desires in Buddhist teachings. It emphasizes the attainment of a transcendent state free from desire through the realization of “no suffering and no happiness.”<sup>113</sup>

Additionally, there are four methods known as the Four Meditative Absorptions; therefore, the bhikkhu is able to eliminate desires and unwholesome actions, cultivating awareness and observation, distancing himself from the arising of joy and

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四年 1884-1888 常熟刻經處刻本), National Center for Philosophy and Social Sciences Documentation Vol. 7, juan 30, 11. Accessed July 22, 2024.

<https://www.ncpssd.org/Literature/articleinfo?type=Ancient&barcodenum=70063035>

<sup>112</sup> Yan Zhitui (顏之推), “Gui xin pian (歸心篇),” *Yan shi jia xun* (顏氏家訓) [*The Family Instructions of Master Yan*] (Chengdu: Xin Guang Book Store, 1946), 61.

<sup>113</sup> Fang Litian, “Buddhism’s introduction into China and its change and development” in *Chinese Buddhism and Traditional Culture*, 103&105-6.

pleasure, and entering the first absorption. . . . .By remembering to let go and to experience joy, one enters the third absorption. Finally, by distancing oneself from both suffering and pleasure, and first eliminating anxiety and joy, one reaches a state of neither suffering nor pleasure, entering the fourth absorption while maintaining purity.<sup>114</sup>

How does the human spirit and mind approach the elevated state of “meditation”? This process can be divided into four stages of meditation. The first stage focuses on eliminating mental desires and emphasizes doing good while avoiding evil. The second stage aims to eliminate external perceptions and feelings, preventing external objects from influencing one's mind. The third stage centers on the practice of renunciation, detaching oneself from thoughts and other realms; the goal is to ensure that individuals are not swayed by emotional joy, instead defining their happiness from a detached perspective. As for the temptations posed by external objects and the desires of the human heart, whether material or sexual, these should be relinquished from the outset:

How do we know that this true? It is simply because *yujie* (欲界) [the realm of desire] confounds good [intentions] and by its nature extends to the *liutian* (六天) [six heavens]; and because *sejie* (色界) [the realm of form] contains *ding* (定) [the accomplishment of concentration], whose substance covers *badi* (八地) [the eight stages]. These two realms fall within the domain of secular ties, without one differing from the other in their “taste for craving.” Both are nothing but *samudaya* (jidi, cause for the origination of suffering) to different degrees.<sup>115</sup>

*Yujie* and *sejie* both pertain to the secular realm and represent the contaminations with which secular individuals grapple. The article “Xichan” (習禪), attributed to Daoxuan (道宣), elucidates that the purpose of practicing Zen is to renounce the influences of sexual desire.

<sup>114</sup> *The Buddha Speaks of the Dirgha Agama* (佛說長阿含經) No.9: *The Second Collection of Sutras* (第二分眾集經) No.5, *China Academic Digital Associative Library*, 11-2. Accessed July 22, 2024.

<http://cadal.edu.cn/cardpage/bookCardPage?ssno=02019050>

<sup>115</sup> The text is original from: Daoxuan, “Xichan (習禪) no.5,” *Xu gaoseng zhuan* (續高僧傳) [*Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*] juan 20, no.34, The National Library of China (廣勝寺金皇統九年 1149). Accessed July 20, 2024.

[http://read.nlc.cn/allSearch/searchDetail?searchType=10021&showType=1&indexName=data\\_892&fid=ZHCH0776](http://read.nlc.cn/allSearch/searchDetail?searchType=10021&showType=1&indexName=data_892&fid=ZHCH0776). The translation is refer from: Jinhua Chen, “An Alternative View of the Meditation Tradition in China: Meditation in the Life and Works of Daoxuan (596-667),” *Toung Pao* Vol. 88, no. 2 (2002), 335. Accessed July 24, 2024. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4528904>

Only in this manner can one achieve true transcendence, which is also why monks are termed “monastics”: they withdraw from the secular world and its temptations.

The concepts of the five precepts, three practices, and four stages of meditation can be considered core elements that pervade Buddhist teachings, providing a comprehensive explanation of the methods and purposes guiding Buddhist monks in their practice.

Concerning human desire, it is noted that such desires disturb the peace of mind; however, this issue is also an inevitable aspect of human existence. Buddhist practice aims to enable individuals to navigate the world while remaining spiritually unaffected by its disturbances, including sexual desires. Conversely, sexual desires are phenomena that practitioners should strive to avoid, rather than indulge. Consequently, erotic literature about monks, exemplified by 僧尼孽海 [*Monks and Nuns in a Sea of Sins*], highlights a profound moral conflict.

When monks, who are expected to abstain from sexual desire, engage in discussions of eroticism, the resulting portrayal of their violation of Buddhist precepts underscores a clear contradiction and thematic specificity.

During the Southern and Northern Dynasties, while many rulers supported the development of Buddhism, instances of measures, policies, or attacks against the religion, particularly under Emperor Taiwu of the Northern Wei Dynasty (北魏太武帝, 408-452 AD) and Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou Dynasty (北周武帝, 543-578 AD). The excessive proliferation of Buddhist temples led to an increasing number of people becoming monks or nuns, which in turn diminished agricultural production and tax revenue. Furthermore, monasteries accumulated significant landholdings, which they leased and exploited for labor, prompting both rulers to enact repressive measures against Buddhism.<sup>116</sup> The two incidents of the suppression of Buddhism, along with the persecution initiated by Emperor Wuzong of

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<sup>116</sup> Fang Litian, “Buddhism’s introduction into China and its change and development” in *Chinese Buddhism and Traditional Culture*, 37.

the Tang Dynasty (唐武宗, 814-846 AD), are collectively referred to as the *Three Disasters of Wu* (三武滅佛). The development of Buddhism in China has not been without challenges. However, it is undeniable that in the trend of synthesizing Confucianism and Buddhism, Buddhist doctrines were not only integrated with Confucian thought but also reinforced the idea that human desires should be eliminated through conscious effort and self-cultivation.

The theories of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism introduced new ideas into Chinese thought and culture, establishing values that have endured for thousands of years. Traditionally, Confucianism has been closely associated with Chinese intellectual history. However, with the increasing prevalence of Daoism and Buddhism, it is essential to consider their influence as well. This implies that Confucianism is not the sole source of the Chinese cultural code of conduct throughout intellectual history.<sup>117</sup> While Confucianism represents the mainstream social theory that has influenced most Chinese people, it does not necessarily dictate their behavior. As previously discussed, doctrinal content evolves in response to changing times, and this applies to perspectives on desire as well. Both philosophical thought and people's behavioral inclinations are fluid across different societal levels. Confronting desire is an unavoidable aspect of human nature; consequently, numerous works addressing the expression of desire have emerged.

## 2. Context: Well-known Works

Literary works serve as crucial materials for understanding the mindset of their creators, as well as the social and cultural context of their time. Japan, experienced the influence of Chinese culture through the envoys sent during the Sui and Tang dynasties. As a result, the themes of free love depicted in classic ancient texts such as *The Manyoshu* (萬葉

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<sup>117</sup> Masako Kohama, and Linda Grove, eds. *Gender History in China*. English edition. Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press, 2021, 184-198.

集)<sup>118</sup> and *Genji Monogatari* (源氏物語)<sup>119</sup> are often characterized as abnormal and contrary to prevailing social morals and order.<sup>120</sup> The simultaneous existence of freedom and constraint often creates as a sense of contradiction between ideals and reality in artistic expression. In the context of indigenous Chinese culture, the expression of sexual desire is not limited to textual representations; it also encompasses imagery in painting and even direct visual and physical interactions.

The history of spring palace paintings (春宮畫, erotic paintings) is closely linked to the *Room Book* (房中書). Many *spring palace paintings* have been preserved in the form of illustrations within these texts, contributing to their dissemination. The origins of China's *Room Book* can be traced back to the Western Han Dynasty, during which many classics had already been composed.<sup>121</sup> During the Six Dynasties period, Daoist scholars, with Ge Hong (葛洪, 283-343) as a prominent figure, further integrated *sexual practices* (房中術) with the pursuit of immortality. Additionally, many itinerant practitioners falsely claimed that such techniques could also enhance one's official career prospects.<sup>122</sup> This development further promoted the dissemination of sexual practices and the *Room Books* that recorded such content. By the mid-to-late Ming dynasty, *spring palace paintings* had become widespread, reaching their peak in the early Wanli era. Not only were dedicated albums of *spring palace*

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<sup>118</sup> The oldest anthology of *waka* in Japan is renowned for its collection of high-quality poems. The works included span approximately from 710 to 759, corresponding to the Tang Dynasty's Kaiyuan and Tianbao periods, which are commonly referred to as the flourishing era of Emperor Xuanzong's reign in the Tang Dynasty.

<sup>119</sup> The *Shikibu Murasaki's* long novel, composed between 1001 and 1008, is a significant representative work of classical Japanese literature.

<sup>120</sup> Miya Moro, *Meiji Japan: The budding new era and new women* (Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing Co., Ltd., 2014), 31-2.

<sup>121</sup> R.H.van Gulik, Yang Quan (楊權) trans., *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period with an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ching Dynasty, B.C. 206-A.D. 1644* (Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Press, 2005), 6. The primary classical texts consist of eight works: *Rongcheng yindao* (容成陰道), *Wuchengzi yindao* (務成子陰道), *Yao shun yindao* (堯舜陰道), *Tang pan geng yindao* (湯盤庚陰道), *Tianlao zazi yindao* (天老雜子陰道), *Tianyi yindao* (天一陰道), *Huangdi san wang yangyang fang* (黃帝三王養陽方), and *Sanjia nei fang you zi fang* (三家內房有子方).

<sup>122</sup> R.H.van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period with an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ching Dynasty, B.C. 206-A.D. 1644*, 15-6.

*paintings* published, but illustrated books containing erotic images also flourished, particularly in regions like Fujian, Anhui, and Jiangsu. This popularity even gave rise to specific painting schools centered on these works.<sup>123</sup> In an era without visual media and broadcasting, Chinese people relied on paintings as a means of visual imagination and satisfaction. As this form of expression developed, more people engaged in its creation, leading to the formation of distinct painting schools. From a regional perspective, the economic prosperity of the Jiangnan coastal area also contributed significantly to the rise of erotic consumption and the flourishing of this artistic genre.

Commercialized consumption of erotic services was also reflected in the brothel industry. The flourishing brothel culture of late Ming China can be seen in the prosperous coastal cities, from Guangzhou to the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. The booming trade in human trafficking fueled the expansion of this industry.<sup>124</sup> The term “Yangzhou shouma” (揚州瘦馬) emerged during this period, referring to young courtesans or women sold into prostitution, with Yangzhou being the primary hub for the procurement of beautiful women.<sup>125</sup> Although the Ming government attempted to regulate the industry by establishing official brothels and maintaining official registries of courtesans,<sup>126</sup> the growing market scale in the mid-to-late Ming period rendered these regulatory efforts ineffective.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> R.H.van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period with an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ching Dynasty, B.C. 206-A.D. 1644*, 134 & 163.

<sup>124</sup> Harriet T. Zurndorfer, “Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550–1644),” *International Review of Social History*, no. 56 (August 2011), 198. Accessed October 3, 2024. doi:10.1017/S0020859011000411.

<sup>125</sup> Harriet T. Zurndorfer, “Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550–1644),” 199.

<sup>126</sup> Wang Hongtai, “[Famous prostitutes and artistic life in brothels - prostitutes and literati during the Ming and Qing Dynasties] 青樓名妓與情藝生活 — 明清間的妓女與文人,” in *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and Human Desires: Post/Modernity in Late Imperial Chinese Culture* (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1999), 75.

<sup>127</sup> Matthew Harvey Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000), 213-4.

Sexual practices, printing technology, commercial development, and logistical exchanges all converged during the mid-to-late Ming period, resulting in a significant advancement of sexual culture. In an era where printed materials were the primary medium for information dissemination, both text and illustrations became the most direct channels for expressing erotic imagination. Transcending geographic limitations and the confines of brothels, people could increasingly indulge their fantasies through printed works.

### Chapter 3: Erotic Literature Development in Ming and Qing dynasties

#### 1. Definition: *Yanqing* (豔情), and *Yanqing* (言情), *Xiaxiesie* (狹邪), *Shiqing* (世情)

The culture of sexual desire has long been an indelible aspect of human society. In addition to physical artistic creation and interpersonal contact, literature serves as a medium through which individuals express their emotional experiences, expectations, and stirring imaginations. In China, such literary content is commonly referred to using terms such as *Yanqing* (豔情), *Yanqing* (言情), *Xiaxiesie* (狹邪), and *Shiqing* (世情).

This section discusses the meanings of these four glyphs in detail. Are there any differences among them? Focusing specifically on the term *Yan* (豔), it denotes “the feathers are fine, long, and plump. 春秋傳 [Chunqiu Zhuan] states: ‘Beautiful and bright.’”<sup>128</sup> This explanation is derived from the earliest and most prestigious dictionary reference in Chinese history, the 說文解字 [Shuo Wen Jie Zi]. From this interpretation, it is evident that prior to the Qin Dynasty, *Yan* was employed to describe beauty and aesthetic qualities without necessarily carrying an erotic connotation.

Similarly, in the literary domain, *Yan* initially lacked erotic connotations. During the Spring and Autumn (770-476 BC) and Warring States (475-221 BC) periods, *Yan* songs (豔歌) were originally a form of folk music from the Chu kingdom. In the Han Dynasty, the lyrical passages in 相和曲 (Xianghe qu) were also referred to as *Yan*. At this time, the term *Yan* was first used to denote songs characterized by “gorgeous lyrical passages.” This type of 樂府 (Yuefu) poetry designated as *Yan* did not pertain to any specific content or nature of the lyrics.<sup>129</sup> However, as these songs began to be perceived as stirring yet lewd sounds, they were gradually associated with obscene music and poetry from the standpoint of political

<sup>128</sup> Xu Shen, edited by Duan Yucui, *Quan dian shuo wen jie zi* (圈點說文解字) [Punctuated Shuo Wen Jie Zi] (Taipei: Wan Juan Lou Books Company Limited, 2002), 210.

<sup>129</sup> Kang Zhengguo, *Revisiting the Wind and Moon: Sex and Classical Chinese Literature*, 140.

enlightenment.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, since *Yan* songs frequently depicted themes of female eroticism, the term *Yan* gradually acquired multiple meanings, encompassing descriptions of female beauty, lasciviousness, and erotic content.<sup>131</sup> Consequently, what began as a reference to specific passages expanded to encompass entire literary works and ultimately became an independent adjective denoting characteristics of a literary genre.

During the 辭賦 (Ci Fu) era of the Wei, Jin, and Six Dynasties, the creation of *Ci Fu* with titles like 三婦豔 [Three Women in Beauty] reflected the prevailing trend of 宮體詩 [palace-style poetry], incorporating erotic imagery between men and women into the text. Initially, poems with the same title in the ancient works of the Han Dynasty depicted women's domestic labor, but by the Wei, Jin, and Six Dynasties, they had taken on erotic overtones.<sup>132</sup> This shift caused the term *Yan* to no longer simply denote beauty but to also carry erotic implications. In contemporary usage, the terms *Yanqing* and *Yan-poetry* primarily refer to works that depict intimate relations between men and women.

The emergence of palace-style poetry during the Wei and Jin Dynasties reflects the rising popularity of erotic writing in this period. With the growing influence of Buddhism and the decline of Confucian dominance, such trends became prominent in the social culture of the Southern and Northern Dynasties. One perspective argues that this led to the corruption of social morals and the spread of licentiousness, while another suggests that literature was able to flourish more freely in this environment.<sup>133</sup> The rise of palace-style poetry serves as an

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<sup>130</sup> Kang Zhengguo, *Revisiting the Wind and Moon: Sex and Classical Chinese Literature*, 141.

<sup>131</sup> Kang Zhengguo, *Revisiting the Wind and Moon: Sex and Classical Chinese Literature*, 142.

<sup>132</sup> Shen Yue (沈約), Wang Yun (王筠), Wu Jun (吳均), Chen Shubao (陳叔寶), and other poets of the Wei and Jin periods all created works under the theme of "Three Beautiful Women" (三婦豔), with each poem using the behaviors of three women to evoke representations of desire and erotic imagery. Notably, the form of the "Three Beautiful Women" poem traces its origins to the Han Dynasty's ancient poem "Encountering One Another" (相逢行), which originally contained no erotic connotations. The above analyses of these poems are referenced from: Li-feng Chi, "Literary Theory, Yuefu Poetry, and the 'Fude' Style: Three Perspectives on the 'Cifu Hua' Phenomenon in the Six Dynasties," *Bulletin of the Department of Chinese Literature National Chengchi University* 33 (June 2022), 62-65. [https://doi.org/10.30407/BDCL.202006\\_\(33\).0002](https://doi.org/10.30407/BDCL.202006_(33).0002).

<sup>133</sup> Qing-Bing Ye, *History of Chinese Literature Vol. 1* (Taipei: Taiwan Student Book Co. Ltd., 1987), 186.

example. Also known as the 徐庾體 [*Xu-Yu style*], it originated from the literary salon led by Xu Chi (徐摛, 471 – 551) and Yu Xin (庾信, 513 – 581) around the Liang Dynasty of the Southern Dynasties.<sup>134</sup> With the support of Emperor Xiao Gang (蕭綱, 503 – 551) of the Liang Dynasty, these poems primarily centered on the beauty of women and romantic love between men and women.<sup>135</sup>

The concept of eroticism can be viewed as an expression of emotion, aligning with the “lyrical tradition.” In the case of palace-style poetry:

It is rooted in literary tradition. If palace-style poetry indeed became a trend within this tradition, it diverged from the rigid, restrained, and emotionless legacy of ancestral edicts, instead being rich with emotion and desire. Therefore, palace poetry can undoubtedly be classified as part of the lyrical tradition.<sup>136</sup>

The emotions expressed within this tradition encompass a wide range of feelings, including sexual desire. As such, the term *yanqing* has evolved from its original meaning of “beautiful and splendid” to one that describes “the portrayal of beauty and eroticism in literature,” representing a natural extension of the concept. In considering the eroticism of *yanqing* within the lyrical tradition, one can observe that *yanqing*’s romantic and emotional expressions are essentially synonymous with the articulation of emotions and desires.

香奩體 [*Xianglian Style*] is another form of *yan* poetry. This term originated with Yan Yu (嚴羽, ?-1245) during the Song Dynasty, who named it after its thematic similarities to poems that primarily focus on women, depicting clothing, attire, and makeup. This style is notably represented by the 香奩集 [*Xiang-Lian Collection*] by the late Tang poet Han Wo

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<sup>134</sup> Kang-i Sun Chang, and Stephen Owen, eds, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature. Volume 1, To 1375* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 262.

<sup>135</sup> Zhang Longxi, “The Rise of Wen or Literature: The Southern and the Northern Dynasties,” in *A History of Chinese Literature*, 83 & 86.

<sup>136</sup> Chi Lifeng, “The Relationship between the Palace Poem and the Lyric Tradition of the Liang-Chen Dynasties – A Study on the Three Types of Palace Poem on Liang-Chen Dynasties,” *Journal of Chinese Literature of National Chen Kung University* 40 (March 2013), 11.  
<https://www.airitilibrary.com/Article/Detail?DocID=P20170720001-201303-201708040013-201708040013-1-32>.

(韓偓, 842-923).<sup>137</sup> Broadly speaking, Xiang-Lian Style refers to “poems that describe women or are related to women, which were often classified as ‘erotic poems’ in the past.”<sup>138</sup> The tradition of writing about women traces its origins to the *Shi jing* and *Chu ci* and their thematic concerns. This inheritance signifies a long-standing tradition of representing women, not exclusive to any single dynasty or genre, but embodying a broader historical continuity. Descriptions of women, including the emotional desires associated with them, form an integral part of this literary tradition.

In comparison, *Xiaxie* and *Shiqing* are literary terms that emerged only in the late Qing Dynasty and are often used as categories for novels. The definition of “worldly love novels” (*Shiqing*) is rooted in the term 世情書 [worldly love letters] proposed by Lu Xun (魯迅, 1881 – 1936), referring to works that explore human relationships. The origin of *Xi-axie* novels is also attributed to Lu Xun. It derives from his 中國小說史略 [*A Brief History of Chinese Novels*], where he defines these novels as featuring actors as protagonists, often spanning dozens of chapters.<sup>139</sup> While this classification may not seem to interfere with the development of erotic literature from the mid-Ming to mid-Qing dynasties, it nonetheless reflects an expression of mood grounded in themes of worldly sex, viewed through the lens of the “lyrical tradition.”

When conducting literary criticism from the perspective of historical context, it may not be entirely accurate to claim that the chaotic and decadent era of the Wei and Jin Dynasties directly gave rise to palace-style poetry. However, the lyricism of palace-style

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<sup>137</sup> Yu Yuting, “Represent the Glory: On the Meaning of the Beauty Fragrant Grass of Hong Qi Sheng’s Fragrant Trousseau Style,” *Journal of Chinese Literature of National Chen Kung University* 58 (September 2017), 133. <https://www.airitilibrary.com/Article/Detail?DocID=P20170720001-201709-201805220018-201805220018-131-157>

<sup>138</sup> Yu Yuting, “The Call of Beauty and Fragrant Grass: On Metaphor and Romance in Lian Heng’s Fragrant Trousseau Style,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 50, no. 3 (September 2020), 485.

<sup>139</sup> Hu Yannan, “On the Generic Category of Fengyue Meng: Courtesan Novel, City Novel or Secular Novel?” *Journal of Chinese Literature of National Chen Kung University* 39 (December 2012), 117-19.

poetry did characterize the era, revealing its distinctive temperament.<sup>140</sup> From this period to the development of erotic literature in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, erotic literature should not be viewed as a symbol of degeneration or moral corruption. Moral judgments ought to be set aside, as erotic literature reflected the diverse cultural landscape of the Ming and Qing periods, allowing works that directly expressed emotional desires to flourish. Erotic lyrics, music, and novels were products of this broader trend toward “erotic writing.” As far as novels are concerned, there is no universally accepted or rigid academic definition of what constitutes an “erotic novel.” Many terms describe works with similar themes involving sexual content.<sup>141</sup> Compared to the broader definition of *yanqing* in poetry mentioned above, the scope of *yanqing* in novels appears to be much narrower. Based on the collections of erotic novels currently housed or published in Taiwan and China, the works included are predominantly authored by men.<sup>142</sup> This phenomenon warrants further investigation: Why do erotic poems have verifiable female authors, while erotic novels seem to lack evidence of female participation in this literary genre? This disparity may be related to the selection criteria for literary collections, as women’s erotic novel writing might not have been compiled as systematically as poetry. Alternatively, it could be due to the social roles of women during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, who were tasked with managing household

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<sup>140</sup> Chi Lifeng, “The Relationship between the Palace Poem and the Lyric Tradition of the Liang-Chen Dynasties – A Study on the Three Types of Palace Poem on Liang-Chen Dynasties,” 26. *Shijing* (詩經) is the oldest anthology of Chinese poetry, containing 311 poems (305 of which remain today). Notably, the compilation of the *Shijing* followed a process in which officials of the Music Bureau collected, organized, and edited the poems into a comprehensive volume. For further reference: Qing-Bing Ye, “Chapter II: Shi-Jing,” *History of Chinese Literature Vol. 1*, 5-18.

<sup>141</sup> Zhang Tingxing, *History of Ancient Chinese Erotic Novels* (Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press, April 2008), 15.

<sup>142</sup> According to the *History of Ancient Chinese Erotic Novels*, notable collections of Ming and Qing erotic novels are housed in several compilations. These include the erotic novel collections of the Beijing Library, 古本小說集成 [*The Complete Collection of Ancient Chinese Novels*], 明清豔情禁毀小說精粹 [*The Essence of Banned Erotic Novels from the Ming and Qing Dynasties*] by Yuanfang Press, Taiwan’s 中國古豔稀品叢刊 [*Rare Chinese Erotic Works Collection*] by Danqing Publishing, and the 明清善本小說叢刊豔情小說專集 [*Ming and Qing Rare Erotic Novels Series*] by Tianyi Publishing. Tingxing Zhang, *History of Ancient Chinese Erotic Novels*, 14-5.

duties and raising children, which might have limited their participation in the lengthy process of novel writing. For example, in the *ba* (跋) [postscript] *Zunxinge yin gao* (筑心閣吟稿) [*Poetic Drafts from Zhuxin Pavilion*] by Chen Yong (陳雍, c. 1763-1822), Chen's younger brother, Chen Changshi (陳昌時), wrote:

My elder sister devoted herself to serving her elders and diligently raised her children. She worked tirelessly, day and night, on knitting. Although she occasionally recited and composed poems, her output was limited. Upon returning to her hometown, relieved of the full burden of household responsibilities, she gradually found time to rest. My sister resumed painting, writing poetry, and took pleasure in these activities without feeling fatigued. She became particularly dedicated to studying and imitating calligraphy. Thus, although she did not produce a large body of written work during her life, her writings were characterized by chastity, serenity, and elegance, free from any excessive or flamboyant language. This likely reflects her innate personality and cultivated habits.<sup>143</sup>

Due to Chen Yong's primary responsibility for household chores after her marriage, the volume of her writings decreased significantly. It was only after the burden of domestic duties was alleviated that her literary output increased. This in the perspective of male relatives and friends, the domestic roles of women affected the quantity of their written work.

How to view *yanqing* and lyricism? Is writing *yanqing* really an act of rebellion? The explanation from the perspective of lyrical tradition may be:

To be moved by woman's beauty is itself a kind of sexual desire. To experience loving feelings is, even more assuredly, a kind of sexual desire. Every act of love, every carnal congress of the sexes, is brought about precisely because sensual delight in beauty has kindled the feeling of love.<sup>144</sup>

Recording the content of *yanqing* is essentially a documentation of emotions. Through *yanqing* literature, authors express their profound emotions, allowing readers to share in their

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<sup>143</sup> Chen Yong (陳雍), “跋” [preface] in *Zunxinge yin gao* (筑心閣吟稿) [*Poetic Drafts from Zhuxin Pavilion*] (1822), 跋 1a-1b. <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/results-work.php?language=eng&workID=84>.

<sup>144</sup> Wu Ihsien, “Lust as Prerequisite: Eroticism in *The Story of the Stone*,” *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 4:1, April 2017, 129. Accessed July 9, 2024. DOI 10.1215/23290048-3780740.

sentiments. Beyond its association with eroticism, *yanqing* writing is not merely a vehicle for sensual release but also an expression of pure emotion. By integrating the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, and acknowledging natural human desires, *yanqing* literature serves as a means for humans to articulate their desires. The expression of inner feelings through writing can therefore be seen as an affirmation of human nature.

When examining *yanqing* writing through the lens of gender, clear distinctions emerge between male and female perspectives. “Writing about women from a female perspective, though differing in subtlety and directness, generally maintains a certain level of implicitness when addressing the body.”<sup>145</sup> In the following sections, the four major forms of Chinese literature—poetry, *ci*, and the novel—will be discussed respectively.

### 1.1. Poem 詩

Poetry is a literary form with a long history of development in China. Generally, it is characterized by rhyming patterns, typically with five or seven characters per line, and can consist of four or eight lines in a poem, or even an unlimited number of lines.<sup>146</sup> As early as the pre-Qin period, there existed a collection of poetry known as the 詩經 [*Shi jing*]. The representative poems of the Han Dynasty include 樂府 [ballads] and 古詩 [Gu shi].

Depending on the author’s identity, these poems can be classified into aristocratic and

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<sup>145</sup> Zhang Hongsheng, “[A Study of Romantic Yongwu Ci by Women Writers in the Qing Dynasty] 論清代女詞人的豔情詠物詞,” 530.

<sup>146</sup> This chapter focuses primarily on the style and content of erotic literature, with poetic meter being a secondary concern. Thus, the evolution of metrical rules in Chinese poetry will be briefly explained in footnotes. Regarding meter, the development of Chinese poetry has moved from loose to stringent and back to a more relaxed approach. Poetry is categorized by the number of characters per line, such as 五言 [five-character], 七言 [seven-character], or 雜言 [mixed-character] verses, and also by the rhyme schemes, determined by the final character’s rhyme. Whether each line must have the same number of characters and whether lines must rhyme depends on the type of poem.

The Tang dynasty marked the period of the strictest poetic rules. Poems needed to have five or seven characters per line, with four lines for 絕句 [quatrains] and eight lines for 律詩 [regulated verse]. Even-numbered lines had to rhyme, and each character’s tone followed a strict alternation pattern. This era featured an abundance of complex poetic regulations. However, as time progressed into the Ming and Qing dynasties, poetic forms such as 古詩 [ancient poetry], 樂府 [ballads], quatrains, and regulated verse coexisted, giving poets greater freedom in their choice of form. Despite this, the metrical structures largely retained the conventions of earlier periods.

civilian literature. The ballads in the Han Dynasty also served as the official office responsible for collecting poetry, gathering two major categories: folk songs and works created by literati.<sup>147</sup>

By the time of the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the style of poetry began to favor ornate language and beautiful rhymes, leading to what became known as “aesthetic literature,” which was even influenced by Buddhist Zen:<sup>148</sup>

Since the Jianan period, the style of poetry has increasingly embraced *yan*. In the Wei period, it was characterized by richness; in the Jin period, it became elaborate; in the Song period, it was noted for its beauty; and in the Chen period, it manifested as excessive.<sup>149</sup>

This statement comprehensively annotates the poetic styles of each dynasty during the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, distinguishing the subtle differences in the main style of *yan*, while also emphasizing that *yan* is a crucial keyword for the poetic style in these periods.

The late Tang Dynasty was pivotal in the advancement of erotic poetry. Liu Guo (劉過)’s works, which include themes of both triviality and eroticism, can be traced directly to the literary traditions of this period, representing a natural evolution of lyrical expression.<sup>150</sup> By the Ming Dynasty, 擬古派 [the Revivalist School]<sup>151</sup> not only prioritized the rhythm of poetry and advocated a return to the traditions of the Shi Jing, but also emphasized lyricism as a central tenet of content, underscoring the need to express emotions. This perspective is

<sup>147</sup> Ye Qingbing, *History of Chinese Literature Vol. 1*, 86.

<sup>148</sup> Ye Qingbing, *History of Chinese Literature Vol. 1*, 152.

<sup>149</sup> The original source is from the preface by Ding Fubao (丁福保) in the Qing dynasty titled *Complete Poems of the Han, Three Kingdoms, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties* (全漢三國晉南北朝詩). Due to the difficulty in locating the original text, the citation is referenced from: Qing-Bing Ye, *History of Chinese Literature Vol. 1*, 152.

<sup>150</sup> Zhang Hongsheng, “[A Study of Romantic Yongwu Ci by Women Writers in the Qing Dynasty] 論清代女詞人的豔情詠物詞,” *Qinghua xuebao* 48, no. 3 (2018): 529.

<sup>151</sup> The *Revivalist School* was the dominant literary movement during the mid-Ming dynasty. The term “mid-Ming” refers to the period defined in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, Volume II: From 1375*, which divides Ming dynasty literature into three phases: 1375 to 1450, 1450 to 1520, and 1520 to 1572 (p. 1).

connected to the Neo-Confucianism led by Wang Yangming during the Ming Dynasty.<sup>152</sup>

The rise of the Revivalist School and the integration of Yangming's philosophy of mind further elucidate the development of the lyrical nature of erotic poetry in the Ming Dynasty.<sup>153</sup>

Bai Huan (白歡) and Qiu Tan (丘坦, 1564-?) exemplify a well-known romance between a scholar and a courtesan during the Ming dynasty. "Linzhong ji Qiulang" (臨終寄丘郎) [Sending a Reply to Qiu Lang] by Bai Huan: She tells her life experience of being lost in the brothel and also expresses her regrets about leaving Qiu so early:

I have no control over my life and destiny and am alone and far away from my hometown. One day, I got lost and jumped into a dangerous situation (came to the brothel). All my companions held hatred for such a fate. I learned calligraphy, writing and poetry when I was only 11 or 12. At 13 or 14, I was already good at singing and dancing, and my reputation spread to all the brothels. However, I always feel sad about my humbleness and the pain of being a prostitute, wandering in the world but not even as good as the dirt under the steps. . . . . I was sinking into this and had no idea when I would be freed. I never expected that I would be favoured by my *lang-jun* (Qiu). It is like a rescued net, like a withered tree flourishing again. However, the danger and malice of the human heart are unpredictable. Before I can serve you, I will say goodbye to you forever. . . . . I can meet you in this life, and the regrets and sorrows of the past have been resolved. I wear the jade ring you gave me and will never give it up, whether life or death. Now, I can only use this poem to repay you and let you know my thoughts when I am about to die. Although I don't know where my bones will be buried after my death, my soul will follow you.<sup>154</sup>

"Linzhong ji Qiulang" (臨終寄丘郎) [Sending a Reply to Qiu Lang]:

I still recall that autumn in August, when the golden breeze whispered through the air, and my husband and I revered each other beneath the soft glow of the lamp in the east wing. Ashamed, I felt like mere grass beside him, a jade tree standing tall; yet our hearts were intertwined, bound as closely as glue and paint. Each night,

<sup>152</sup> Sun Chang Kangi, and Stephen Owen, eds, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature. Volume II, From 1375* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29-30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521855594>.

<sup>153</sup> The theoretical details will be elaborated further in "Chapter V. The Illustration of Erotic Literature," which focuses on the social and ritualistic perspectives.

<sup>154</sup> Huan Bai, "Linzhong ji qiulang (臨終寄丘郎) [Sending a Reply to Qiu Lang]," in *Qinglou yun yu* (青樓韻語) [*The Rhymes of qinglou*] (Shanghai: Central Book Store, 1935), juan 2, 33.

longing for one another, sleep eluded me, and though our love burned bright, the distance made our sighs echo in vain. . . . I yearn for my husband's love to remain steadfast, unyielding as mud in water, though the flames of the temple have dwindled, worshipping the God of Fire. Who dares to say that storms still linger in the vast galaxy? I cannot sever my ties with dear friends, nor can I repay the precious bonds of our hearts. On this path of parting, my sorrow is profound, as if my very heart were shattered. What remedy could my husband find to soothe my deep despair?<sup>155</sup>

Comparing Bai Huan's two love poems, they articulate her longing for Qiu Tan and reveal how women "fell into the mortal world" and devoted themselves to the brothel business in the late Ming Dynasty. Here, we will first focus on Bai's writing skills in depicting emotions: she articulates her longing, and her shy outward expression implies profound love. In the *yanqing* sections, these two poems do not reveal any erotic aspects; however, in terms of the lyrical nature of *yanqing*, readers can perceive Bai's deep lovesickness between the lines.

The long poem "賦佳人新婚" [An Ode to a Lady on Her Wedding Day]<sup>156</sup> by Liang Yuji (梁玉姬), a famous prostitute in the Ming Dynasty, also expresses strong affection and describes the affection of a couple, including the physical details in the bridal chamber. The whole poem begins with an outline of the woman's beautiful appearance and posture:

Her face, like an almond blossom, radiates warmth reminiscent of a March Spring.  
Her skin, as pure as ice and snow, remains cool and serene even in the heat of June.  
Such exquisite beauty dazzles the eye, precious and luminous as jade."<sup>157</sup>  
"The distant mountains enchant the gaze, while autumn waters mirror the gentle waves. Too many embellishments can stray from the original perfection, and the woman's delicate charm may not be captured fully on canvas. With a gentle sigh, she relaxes her shoulders, cradling the embroidered quilt in her hands, leaning quietly against the railing."<sup>158</sup>

<sup>155</sup> Bai Huan, "Ji da qiu changru (寄答丘長孺) [Replying to Qiu Changru]," in *The Rhymes of Qinglou*, juan 3, 106.

<sup>156</sup> Liang Yuji (梁玉姬), "Fu jia ren xin hun (賦佳人新婚) [An Ode to a Lady on Her Wedding Day]," in Edited by Xing Zhong, *Mingyuan shi gui (名媛詩歸) [Collected Poems of Eminent Women]*: 36 juan (1621-1644 version), fasc. 18, 35.16a-17a.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

This subsequently portrays the intimate and passionate interactions between the couple:

The silver-red flames flicker from the burning red candles, while the rich scent of sandalwood wafts from the cauldron. Gorgeous curtains, heavy with fragrance, sway gently, and amidst the quilts adorned with hibiscus blooms, their bodies entwine in a dance of intimacy. The lovers, locked in an embrace, intertwine their arms, neither hesitating to trim the wick, keeping the candle's light alive. Time seems suspended as they gaze deeply into one another's eyes.

Among a thousand graceful flowers, the soft, round jade casts a warm glow, enveloping them in a tender atmosphere. Their emotions, fierce and unrestrained, burn like a raging fire, flowing like a swift torrent. The enchanting scene unfolds in the summer breeze, vast as the sweetness of melting nectar. The woman's shy demeanor hints at reluctance, yet it is but a veil; her graceful form invites his touch.

Her wrists curve lazily, lips slightly parted, breathing in a soothing rhythm. Though beauty can linger in a gilded cage, the heart can cultivate its own paradise. The man's arms easily encircle her slender waist, and her dark brows frown like layered mountains. Her bosom rises and falls gently, while he bends low to admire her pristine, snow-white form.

Peach-hued waves ripple with the passage of time, and the begonia blossoms fade into the night. Their love is etched deeply into skin and marrow, binding them with heartfelt vows of devotion. His heart, still eager and ablaze, contrasts with her drowsiness as she drifts toward sleep. Silken sheets feel smooth and moist against their skin, her scarlet cheeks shifting from passionate warmth to the soft glow of tranquility.<sup>159</sup>

Through focused descriptions of body parts such as hands, waist, lips, and brows, and even the chest and hips, Liang presents the scene of a newlywed couple on their wedding night from the female perspective or imagination, vividly displayed before the reader. Zhong Xing's annotations on this poem are also noteworthy. In the line "The lovers, locked in an embrace, intertwine their arms, neither hesitating to trim the wick, keeping the candle's light alive.," he leaves a note indicating "有情" [affection], and in the subsequent lines:

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

The pinnacle of governance lies in refinement and transcendence; though beauty may abound, capturing it in art proves a daunting task. She leans gracefully against the embroidered railing, gently smoothing the quilt, her form nestled against the balustrade. Like a maiden from the neighboring house, her lover is as handsome as the renowned Pan An of ancient times.<sup>160</sup>

he provides a literary commentary stating, “Not flattery, not kitsch, just the right tone...” Zhong affirms the portrayal of romantic feelings between men and women, as reflected in Liang’s *yanqing* poetry. Beyond *yanqing*, Liang specifically emphasizes that the woman of the couple is a “virgin,” highlighting the long-standing Chinese values regarding female chastity. Even in poetry that openly depicts the intimate relations between men and women, it seems difficult to escape traditional social values.

“Shisuo” (十索) [ten requests] represents a distinct theme in erotic poetry. *Qinglou yunyu* features several poems titled “Shisuo” or “Shisuo qu” (十索曲) [ten requests song]. The term *suo* (索) refers to the act of requesting items from others. Most of the content recorded in these poems revolves around the female author soliciting various items from the male object of her affection, depending on the situation. Jing Pianpian (景翩翩) writes in her poem *Suisuo*:

Layers of verdant leaves embrace the budding blooms, as if my true love for my husband remains unspoken. These tender leaves, shaped like delicate pine flowers, are scattered upon his thigh. Turning and twisting, one must bear the toil, and in patience, seek the orchid spectrum from him.<sup>161</sup>

In addition, the most detailed record is Ding Liuniang’s “Shisuo qu” (十索曲):

You know whether your figure is slender or plump, so you can ask for your belt from *lang-jun*. For the beauty of sex, I hate the rush of a beautiful night. The graceful and beautiful eyes and the delicate wrists look at each other without getting bored or satisfied. Pleasurable love cannot bear to be replaced by sleep, so ask *lang-jun* for flowers and candles. You say that flowers are more beautiful than people, but the beauty of people today is comparable to that of flowers. . . . .If I want to show off my

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ding Liuniang, “Shisuo (十索) [ten requests],” in *The Rhymes of Qinglou*, juan 1, 3.

slender hands, I'll ask lang-jun for a ring. I was so shy that I couldn't bear it. I looked at each other hard with my fiery eyes. Without the companionship of affection, we enter the tent of one heart together. If you want to prevent outsiders from looking at you, ask for a brocade curtain from lang-jun. Under the orchid house are green curtains, and the lotus tents are covered with mandarin ducks and brocades. It is better to have fun early in the morning and sleep together if you have deep feelings. If you want to have a romantic relationship together, ask for a flower pillow from lang-jun.<sup>162</sup>

which chronicles the relationship between a man and a woman from their initial acquaintance to intimacy, highlighting their pleasure and requests for various items at different stages. The poem directly and boldly articulates the protagonist's passionate feelings for her *langjun*, expressing a desire to share in their mutual affection. The night is no longer long, yet their haste prevents them from fully savoring their time together. Does the requested item from *langjun* carry any significance? In traditional Chinese literature, numerous narratives feature the exchange of tokens between men and women as expressions of affection. Thus, it can be inferred that "requesting items" within this context serves as a means of conveying emotional connection.

When comparing the expressions of the Sui Dynasty courtesan Ding Liuniang with those of the Ming Dynasty courtesan Jing Pianpian, aside from differences in length, do the exchanged items hold symbolic meaning? Whether it is 蘭花譜 [musical scores], flowers, candles, or cosmetics, these are all literary and artistic objects intended to facilitate closeness with their beloved. The woman depicted by Jing lays green leaves on her lover's legs, symbolizing true love; this scene seems to indicate an implicit expression of sincerity. The reluctance to openly and directly convey their true feelings appears to represent a consistent image of women that has persisted for centuries across the Sui and Ming dynasties.

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<sup>162</sup> Ding Liuniang, "Shisuo (十索) [ten requests]," in *The Rhymes of Qinglou*, juan 1, 3.

Composing erotic verses to convey emotional imagination can be considered a relatively direct form of expression.

The implicit and shy emotional expression is also evident in the works of female authors depicting the image of women. Zhao Yanru (趙燕如), a renowned courtesan of the Ming Dynasty, wrote, “The beauty sips alone, her brows and cheeks a portrait of shyness.”<sup>163</sup> and “Her delicate hands, rosy and demure, gracefully rest by her side.”<sup>164</sup> These lines, describing the shy demeanor of a fifteen-year-old woman, focus on the subtleties of her eyebrows, cheeks, and hands. Such precise descriptions of women’s body parts can also be found in many poems centered on the theme of “beauty:”

Wu Xiao (吳綉): Though her cheeks blush like the dawn, the beauty is not at ease. Like a bluebird poised to spread its wings and take flight, she hesitates in stillness. As spring awakens the grass and trees, one wonders when the cardamom will finally bloom, revealing its delicate smile to the world.”<sup>165</sup>

Gu Ruopu (顧若璞): “The shadows of plantains danced upon the mattress, veiling the delicate pattern of hibiscus flowers. The *jinse* (錦瑟) [brocade zither] and harp rested serenely on the purple jade platform, while peonies flourished in the embrace of the spring breeze. A curtain adorned with emerald beads shielded the candles perched upon silver candlesticks, casting a soft glow. The beauty leaned against the jade flute all day, her rosy smile too shy to allow her fingers to glide effortlessly over the notes of the complete melody.”<sup>166</sup>

Gu Ruopu: The beauty adorned herself with fresh makeup, sitting gracefully by the boat as her delicate fingers strummed the zither strings. Her low, melodious singing, infused with feminine shyness, resembled a begonia flower awakening from a deep slumber, delicate and poised to bloom. Her eyebrows, slender as willow leaves, frame dark hair that accentuates her allure. With shoulders sharp as a knife and a waist as slender as if cinched, she captivates with elegance. Her flowing dress seems to unfurl

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<sup>163</sup> Zhao Yanru, “Gongsun daniang wujian xingzeng Zhougongxia (公孫大孃舞劍行贈周公瑕) [Gongsun Da Niang’s Sword Dance Presented to Zhougongxia],” in *The Rhymes of Qinglou*, juan 1, 10.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Wu Xiao (吳綉), “Ti huashan (題畫扇) [Inscribed Painted Fan],” *Xiaoxuean tiyong* (嘯雪庵題詠) [*Inscriptions and Poems at Xiaoxue Hermitage*]: 1 juan (1644-1722), 題詠.45a. Accessed August 5, 2024.

<sup>166</sup> Gu Ruopu (顧若璞), “Meiren tu (美人圖) [Painting of a Beauty],” *Woyuxuan gao* (臥月軒稿) [*Collected Writings from the Reclining Moon Pavilion*] in *Wu Elin Wang Zhe Yi Zhu Qian Bian* (Jiahuitang Ding Shi Edition, between 1875-1900), 1.2a. Accessed August 11, 2024.

like six paintings, cascading into the waters of the Xiangjiang River. The charm in her eyes conceals surging waves, drawing the gaze of all who behold her.<sup>167</sup>

Chen Yuyin (陳玉瑛): She stands with furrowed brows, leaning gracefully against the red railings as the moon rises late. Secretly, she counts the falling petals, aware that spring is slipping away, her heart set on following the dance of the butterflies. Her beloved's pulse resonates within her, rendering her speechless, filled with sorrow and yearning to understand herself. She recalls the place where we first met, shrouded in the melancholy dusk of Liutang's smoky embrace.<sup>168</sup>

Regardless of the occasion—be it banquets, boudoirs, or boats—the women depicted by female authors consistently embody shy personas. Such gentleness and grace appear to have become stereotypical attributes, commonly employed in works about beauty by authors of both sexes.

Lu Qingzi (陸卿子) and Xu Yuan (徐媛), both recognized as two of the great masters of the Wu clan, also composed descriptive poems centered on the theme of beauty:

Lu Qingzi: The goddess sang shyly, her melodious voice weaving a spell of exquisite beauty, capable of toppling cities. With a posture as graceful as a willow, she twisted and danced, her slender waist creating a captivating sight beneath the moonlight. Her radiant presence evokes questions: is she more beautiful than flowers, or lighter than the gentle touch of a palm?<sup>169</sup>

Xu Yuan: With a clever smile, she glided from the bridal chamber, her delicate charm illuminating the space. Golden powder adorned her pink cheeks, as she wiped the mirror and traced lines of raven yellow. The autumn moon lay hidden in the treasure tent, while evening fragrances curled gracefully from the golden incense burner. Mandarin duck patterns danced upon her emerald, green belt, and the scent of orchid musk lingered on her silk garments. Her hair, styled in *wodou* (倭墮) [woduo hairstyle], was adorned with delicate plum blossoms. The envious Luo girl, with her light grace and slender form, embodied a beauty without peer.<sup>170</sup>

<sup>167</sup> Gu Ruopu, “Hushang meiren (湖上美人) [Beauty on the Lake],” *Woyuxuan gao*, 3.6b-3.7a. Accessed August 11, 2024.

<sup>168</sup> Chen Yuying (陳玉瑛), “Tihua meiren (題畫美人) [Portrait of a Beautified Lady],” *Lanju yincao* (蘭居吟草) [*Orchid Residence: Drafts of Poems*] (the Early Qing Dynasty 1644-1722), 吟草.1b-2a. Accessed August 11, 2024.

<sup>169</sup> Lu Qingzi, “Zen fongmeiren (贈馮美人) [To Lady Fong],” in Edited by Zhong Xing, *Mingyuan shigui*: 36 juan (1621-1644 version), fasc. 16, 32.16a.

<sup>170</sup> Xu Yuan, “Zen meiren (贈美人) [To the Beauty],” in Edited by Zhong Xing, *Mingyuan shigui*, fasc. 17, 33.16a.

The beauty in Lu's poem moves gracefully with a delicate waist, while the beauty in Su's poem is adorned with exquisite makeup and dressed in beautiful garments. The commonality between the two is the portrayal of a shy and demure image of femininity.

The beauty depicted may refer to a woman in a portrait or a female family member. Xu Yuan's poem “贈弟婦葉娘” [Giving to My Sister-in-law Ye Niang] describes, “The beauty sat before the mirror, her shy visage gently reflected, as she lowered her delicate nails. Her brows were softly adorned with dark hues, while slender fingers gracefully arranged the *yue huang* (約黃) [a facial decoration] upon her forehead.”<sup>171</sup> The delicate posture of a woman arranging her appearance before the mirror is vividly portrayed. Notably, the descriptions of her shy cheeks, hair buns, nails, eyebrows, and fingernails closely resemble those found in many works that depict women's appearances.

Furthermore, the lines “The patterned curtain veils the moonlight, and the tent cradles the lingering fragrance.”<sup>172</sup> suggest a nuanced emotional backdrop. Zhong Xing's annotation, “黯淡中生情” [emotions arise in the gloom], reveals the subtle and implicit erotic undercurrents that lie behind the curtain, symbolizing privacy. Here, the love between men and women emerges in a context that is often secretive yet genuine.

The beauty of *Ji* (姬) in Dou Shi's (Wife of Chen Yuancheng)<sup>173</sup> writing contrasts with the sorrow experienced by the old lover between the brother and sister-in-law, thus presenting the female psychology within the traditional Chinese wife and concubine family structure. In addition to describing physical appearance from the perspective of love between men and women, *yanqing* also conceals deeper meanings. The title “Erxiang naji oucheng eryong qianyishou zengsao houyishou zengji” (二兄納姬偶成二詠前一首贈嫂後一首贈姬)

<sup>171</sup> Xu Yuan, “贈弟婦葉娘 [To My Brother's Wife, Yeniang],” in Edited by Zhong Xing, *Mingyuan shigui*, fasc. 17, 33.15b.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid*, 33.15b.

<sup>173</sup> Dou shi (竇氏) [Wife of Chen Yuancheng], Harvard University, Academia Sinica, and Peking University, *China Biographical Database* (July 16, 2024), <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cbdb>.

[Two Poems for My Second Brother's Wife and Concubine]<sup>174</sup> indicates that the poem's origin relates to Dou's brother taking a concubine. In traditional Chinese society, men are permitted to take wives and concubines; however, the female perspective on this practice is often overlooked. The two poems addressed to his brother and sister-in-law reveal Dou Shi's reluctance to part with them.

She expresses this sentiment in the lines, "I wonder how you can still smile so gently? You replied that in our boudoir, we share a longing, filled with cherished memories of days gone by, enough to stir compassion and soothe our hearts."<sup>175</sup> Faced with her husband marrying another woman, the sister-in-law finds herself with limited means of resistance. Dou Shi, as a woman herself, can offer little more than sympathy, advising her to cherish their shared memories. From the poem, "Even the begonia, shy in its beauty, dares not compete with her enchantment. She glides softly, adorned with a jade ring at her waist, sending up a delicate spray of dust in her wake,"<sup>176</sup> it is evident that Dou cannot provide substantial assistance to her sister-in-law. Instead, Dou can only support this beauty by recording her sorrowful fate. In this context, Dou Shi's poem dedicated to the newlywed Ji shifts its focus to the description of Ji's beauty:

The beauty, adorned with a cloud-like bun, greets the dawn with grace in her embroidered drapery. As precious as jade, her shy visage blooms like a pear blossom beneath the moonlight. Her flowing sleeves dance with her, gliding like a swallow on the gentle breeze. She leans on a love as vast as the sea, maintaining a fragile poise that seems poised to dissolve. Even more captivating are her feet, nestled beneath a yellow skirt, adorned in red shoes that curve like delicate bows.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Dou shi (Wife of Chen Yuancheng), "Erxiang naji oucheng eryong qianyishou zengsao houyishou zengji (二兄納姬偶成二詠前一首贈嫂後一首贈姬) [Two Poems for My Second Brother's Wife and Concubine]", *Zhenliange ji* (貞齋閣集) [*Zhenlian Pavilion Collection*] 2 juan (康熙五十六年(1717)刻本, Qing Dynasty), 1.26a. <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/details-work.php?workID=357&language=eng>

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Dou shi, "Erxiang naji oucheng eryong qianyishou zengsao houyishou zengji", 1.26b.

With hair reminiscent of clouds and beauty akin to pear blossoms, the descriptions of light clothing cuffs, delicate postures, silk dresses, and red feet, from Dou Shi's perspective, lack any erotic connotation, emphasizing a pure lyricism that laments *Ji*'s beauty. This style of *yan* writing transcends mere transcends desire, reflecting the helplessness of women in the Qing Dynasty within the constraints of the family-social structure.

When examining the representations of beauties crafted by female authors in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, whether they were prostitutes or ladies, a common portrayal emerges: these beauties are depicted as shy, graceful, and gentle, possessing slender figures and an ethereal fragility akin to flowers that cannot be easily broken. This characterization may be connected to the literary tradition of “xiangcao meiren” (香草美人) [Fragrant Grass and Beauty] in Chinese literature. However, more importantly, this idealized image of slender and delicate women differs from the robust and athletic female figures of the Han and Tang dynasties.<sup>178</sup> It was only during the Song dynasty that such an aesthetic preference for women emerged. Moreover, this ideal persisted in China, when it began to shift during the first half of the century.<sup>179</sup>

If we compare the works from the above era with those from the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns of the Qing Dynasty, are there any inheritances or differences? First, many works continue to explore the theme of “beauty.” For example, Yuan Jinrong (袁鏡蓉)'s “Inscribed on Mrs. Pan and Wang Peizhi's Sister Wan Fan Beauty” begins with “One might liken her cheeks to peach or apricot blossoms, lightly brushed with a delicate hue of red.”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Examples include Wang Zhaojun (王昭君), the beautiful Luo Fu (羅敷), as well as the female warriors Nie Yinniang (聶隱娘) and Hongxian (紅線) of the Tang dynasty. They were famous either for their engagement in physical labor or for their exceptional martial skills. You Jianming (游鑑明), “近代中國女子健美的論述 (1920-1940 年代) [Discussion on Women's Fitness in Modern China (1920s-1940s)],” in Li Zhende (李貞德) ed., 性別、身體與醫療 (*Gender, Body and Medicine*) (Taipei: Linking Publishing Company, 2008), 249-50.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Yuan Jingrong (袁鏡蓉), “Ti panfuren wangpeizhimei wanshan meiren (題潘夫人汪佩之妹紈扇美人) [Inscription for Madam Pan, Younger Sister of Wang Pei: The Silken Fan Beauty],” *Yuequxuan shicao* (月蕖軒詩草) [*Poetry Drafts from the Moon Lotus Pavilion*] (Kuajiji: Wu Shi, 1848), 1.13b-1.14a. Accessed August 5,

The poem continues: “The green shadows dance softly around her, her brows a deep hue, while inked accents bring a refreshing clarity to her features, the tips of her temples elegantly tilting.”<sup>181</sup> This description portrays the image of a beauty holding a fan. The Wang Peizhi mentioned in the title of the poem refers to Wang Renlan (汪紉蘭), a female writer of the same generation and the author of *睡香花室詩稿* [*Poetry Draft in the Sleeping Flower Room*].<sup>182</sup> In Yuan’s poem about a beauty holding a fan, written for a female friend, we can observe her portrayal of beauty from a female perspective. The pink and bright red flowers complement the complexion, the shades of the eyebrows, and the elegant contours of the temples—these elements embody the beauties depicted in Yuan’s paintings.

As for Pan Shuzheng (潘淑正)’s “Tonglu guizhao tuci quanjiang jian chuannu xizuo” (桐廬歸棹途次泉江見船女戲作) [Written in Jest upon Seeing a Boat Girl on the Quanshui River While Returning by Boat from Tonglu]:

The silhouette atop the building is slender, illuminated by a tall silver candle. Silver candles blaze aloft, bathing A Jiao [beauty] in radiant light. Frequently glancing into the mirror, her brows arched, unconcerned with the delicate strokes of Jingzhao’s pen.<sup>183</sup>

Her shoes, like elegant bows, complement each step, which flows like a lotus in bloom. Her graceful movements evoke the essence of a fairy. She stands independent and delicate, her skirt lifting to reveal small feet, as white as jade.<sup>184</sup>

Leaning against the window with a round fan in hand, she deftly weaves through the jade gauze with her green fingers. How enchanting it is when night descends, the soft glow of the lamp illuminating her face as she turns back with a radiant smile.<sup>185</sup>

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2024. <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/results-work.php>.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 1.13b-1.14a.

<sup>182</sup> Renlan Wang, Harvard University, Academia Sinica, and Peking University, *China Biographical Database* (August 4, 2024), [https://inindex.com/biog/searchResult/568603/%E6%B1%AA%E7%B4%89%E8%98%AD#1\\_1](https://inindex.com/biog/searchResult/568603/%E6%B1%AA%E7%B4%89%E8%98%AD#1_1).

<sup>183</sup> Pan Shuzheng (潘淑正), “Tonglu guizhao tuci quanjiang jian chuannu xizuo (桐廬歸棹途次泉江見船女戲作) [Written in Jest upon Seeing a Boat Girl on the Quanshui River While Returning by Boat from Tonglu],” *Yihonglou shicao* (倚紅樓詩草) [*Leaning on the Red Chamber: Draft Poems*] (Qing Guangxu 17 nian, 1891), 7a-7b. Accessed August 5, 2024. <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/results-work.php>.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

From the description of the woman's figure, posture, and delicate movements to the subtle gestures of her eyebrows and fingers, Pan's portrayal of the boat girl epitomizes the image of a shy and fragile woman. Her feet are described as tiny, like lotus flowers, a classic reference to bound feet in the Qing dynasty. In terms of erotic content, these three poems by Pan appear to focus solely on the aesthetic aspects of women's appearances, without incorporating any overt erotic themes:

Emotions in the painting gently return, where flowers and faces faintly discern. A wondrous crane flies only beyond the Peach Blossom Spring. (Hengbo (橫波) wrote: "Thou sayest the flower's red resembles my face, and I say the willow's green mirrors thy grace. When shall we transform into a crane so rare, brushing past leaves, through flowers, flying in the air?)"<sup>186</sup>

This poem appears to depict the image of a woman while painting, while the quotation from Lady Hengbo narrates a woman's affection for her lover, expressing a desire for them to transform into the qianqian bird, a symbol of love, to enjoy joyful moments together.

Cao has preserved this beautiful feminine image through her verses, ensuring that the genuine longing of women for love is preserved for the long term. The use of red blossoms as a metaphor for a woman's face and the green leaves of willows to represent a man's clothing exemplifies the rhetorical technique of *bixing* (比興), a classical Chinese literary device that fuses metaphor and evocative association. Additionally, the qianqian bird—a mythological creature from the Chinese classic 山海經 [*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*—is also employed through *bixing*. Traditionally symbolizing marital affection and conjugal unity, the qianqian bird serves as a symbolic embodiment of Cao's yearning for romantic love. This poem demonstrates how *bixing* is employed not only to articulate the poet's emotional aspirations, but also to imbue the work with a tender and graceful tone.

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<sup>186</sup> Cao Zhenxiu (曹貞秀), "Ti hengbo furen hua taohua (題橫波夫人畫桃花) [Inscription on Madame Hengbo's Painting of Peach Blossoms]," *Xieyunxuan xiaogao erjuan xuzengjuan* (寫韻軒小藁) [*Minor Drafts from the Studio of Harmonious Verses*] in *Yuanyatang quanji* (1815), 1.9b-1.10a. Accessed August 9, 2024.

In contrast to the number of female authors and works emerging from courtesan backgrounds during the late Ming and early Qing periods, the majority of female poetry and literary collections in the Qing dynasty were authored by women from scholarly families. When comparing *yanqing* writings, even though the subject matter remains focused on the “beauty” of women, there is little variation in the descriptive emphasis, which continues to center on the hands, feet, waist, and cheeks.

## 1.2. *Ci* 詞

*Ci* (詞) began to develop during the Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties, ultimately becoming the mainstream literary form in the Song Dynasty. Although *ci* emerged in the Tang Dynasty, its entertainment value inherited elements from the erotic songs of the Southern Dynasties—it could be sung and had specific melodies and musical scores.<sup>187</sup> The hallmark of this style lies in the use of fixed *cipai* (詞牌), which serve as metrical standards. Each *ci-pai* differs in its specifications, including the number of characters, lines, stanzas, tonal patterns, and rhymes. Regarding *ci-pai*, how do literati memorize the metrical specifications? The official examination of *ci-pai* is documented in the Collection of *Qing Ding Ci Pu Kao Zhen* (欽定詞譜考正) [*Imperially Authorized Critical Verification of the Ci Poetry Collection*],<sup>188</sup> which meticulously records the levels and sentence structures of each *ci-pai*, allowing writers to reference it as needed.

In the *ci* “Zui penglai: Duzuo ounian yu wusheng chouxi changyin zhecheng queji” (醉蓬萊：獨坐偶念與吳生疇昔暢飲輒成卻寄) [Sitting alone, I happened to recall the joyful times of drinking with Master Wu in the past, and spontaneously composed this piece to send to him], Shang Zilan (尚紫蘭) revealed her missing affectionate times with Wu-Shen:

<sup>187</sup> Kang Zhengguo, *Revisiting the Wind and Moon: Sex and Classical Chinese Literature*, 266.

<sup>188</sup> Chen Tingjing (陳廷敬) and Wang Yiqing (王奕清); edited by Cai Guoqiang, *Qingding cipu kaozhen* (欽定詞譜考正) [*Imperially Authorized Critical Verification of the Ci Poetry Collection*] (Shanghai: Huadong Normal University Press, 2017).

I recall those enchanted nights beneath the lanterns of the Midnight Festival, where we adorned the door with tassels and poured sweet wine for one another, nestled in your embrace. In that moment, I was half-drenched in intoxication, my cheeks aglow, my hair cascading like clouds. As I savored the wine, our affection deepened, yet a splash of crimson stained my blue garments. I still feel the lingering hesitation that hung in my heart at noon when we parted ways.

As the final notes faded into twilight, I awoke in the stillness of night, fear stirring within me, amplifying the sorrow of separation. We had laughed amidst the sandalwood partitions and the mandarin duck-patterned curtains. Those beautiful memories still seem to radiate warmth, yet I question if they are but figments of my passion, mere daydreams. I attempt to unfold the colorful letter paper, but melancholy washes over me, an unwelcome companion.<sup>189</sup>

Wang Wei (王微, 1597-1647), who was also a well-known prostitute in the late Ming Dynasty, her “醉春風” [Drunken Spring Breeze]:

Who was it that urged *Lang* to first seek the solace of drunkenness? A chill breeze whispered through the window. Bathed in soft light, he cast aside his instrument and embraced his maid, leaning against the fragrant curtain as he drifted into slumber. In his mind lingered the sweet memory of their recent revelry, a heady intoxication, a greedy yearning that wrapped around his heart like a warm embrace.<sup>190</sup>

With intoxication as the central theme, the poems written by two renowned courtesans, Shang and Wang, both depict lovers who eagerly cling to the moments they share. This infatuation with love is further reflected in their choice of *ci-pai*, as both include the word “drunk.” This choice relates to the customary practice of selecting word cards. While the *ci-pai* serves as the primary criterion for establishing rhythm, it can be inferred that the selection of these cards and the formation of meter are closely tied to the emotional state conveyed by each card, as well as to the artistic conception represented by the original work. Elements such as

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<sup>189</sup> Shang Zilan, “Zui penglai: Duzuo ounian yu wusheng chouxi changyin zhecheng queji (醉蓬萊：獨坐偶念與吳生疇昔暢飲輒成卻寄) [Sitting alone, I happened to recall the joyful times of drinking with Master Wu in the past, and spontaneously composed this piece to send to him],” in *The Rhymes of Qinglou* (青樓韻語), juan 1, 24-5.

<sup>190</sup> Wang Wei (王微), “醉春風 [Drunken Spring Breeze],” in *Guixiu cichao* (閨秀詞鈔) (Xuantong period (1909)), fasc. 23, 6.12b. Accessed August 20, 2024.

scattered hair, flushed cheeks, and a yearning for joy clearly express the lyrical dimensions of *yanqing*, while also subtly alluding to erotic physical contact.

Regarding the depiction of women's bodies by female authors, in addition to numerous poems portraying beauties, there are also notable works within the genre of *ci*. "Shengchazi" (生查子), written by Wang Yuzhen (王毓貞), a renowned courtesan from Guangling in the late Ming Dynasty, illustrates the languid appearance of a woman while also imparting a subtle erotic meaning.

Leaning against the window beside the orchids, she felt the cool breeze wafting through, evaporating the heat and drawing beads of sweat upon her chest. The woman languidly rested against the jade stem, her eyes drifting to the flowers trembling as bees savored their nectar. The sweet scent of tender red blossoms filled the air, mingling with the lush emerald scenery that framed her smooth, fresh brows. With a gentle flick of her fly whisk, she seemed to shoo away the blue flies, but in truth, she was tenderly brushing the face of her beloved.<sup>191</sup>

Another song by Wang, "Nangezi" (南歌子), also uses flowers as a metaphor to compare the shy but beautiful body of a woman:

After bathing, her skin glowed with the brilliance of fresh snow, while the traces of makeup had softly faded away. Her dark hair framed her delicate features, enhancing her shy beauty, like a fragile flower in need of support.<sup>192</sup>

If Nan Gezi writes about a woman's *yan* and beauty while bathing, then the following "Shengchazi: ni yan (擬艷)" [simulating *yan*] subtly and obscurely depicts the intimacy between a man and woman after their spring night together:

The flying *xi chi* (鸂鶒) [Mandarin duck], adorned upon emerald mother-of-pearl, glistens as emeralds are inlaid upon her skirt. Clad in such exquisite garments and accessories, she steps into the curtain with a radiant smile. Figures entwine, and flickering lights dance around them. They embrace tenderly, listening to the

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<sup>191</sup> Wang Yuzhen (王毓貞), "生查子," *Guixiu cichao*, fasc. 25, 10.4a. Accessed August 20, 2024.

<sup>192</sup> Wang Yuzhen, "南歌子," *Guixiu cichao*, fasc. 25, 10.3b. Accessed August 20, 2024.

morning's crowing rooster from their pillows, while the copper pot glimmers in the soft glow.<sup>193</sup>

Although Wang Yuzhen's erotic writing in the aforementioned works is relatively obscure or vague compared to those of Shang Zilan and Wang Wei, it embodies a subtle sense of eroticism that invites readers into a space of imaginative interpretation. This may resonate with the commentary on Wang Yuzhen's writings found in *Guixiu cichao*: "Moonlit beauty weaves her verses, each form exquisite, with melodies flowing as gracefully as rounded pearls and as lustrous as jade. Truly, she is a masterful hand from the secret chamber of artistry."<sup>194</sup> As round as jade and faintly radiant, the flow of passion in Wang Yuzhen's writings is characterized by its understated and restrained nature.

If we seek works that depict the appearance and form of *ji* (妓) in lyrics, the writings of Zhu Rouying (朱柔英) from the Ming Dynasty not only provide meticulous descriptions but also vividly capture the softness and delicacy of the female image:

Her face is adorned with delicate makeup, and her hair is artfully twisted into a spiral bun, while her limbs flow with a relaxed grace. Yet, her slender brows are slightly furrowed, revealing a reluctance to share her inner turmoil with the outside world. ....

She bites into cherries with lips like snow, while begonia blossoms, just beginning to bloom, rival the beauty of a lovely maiden. The incense and candles have burned low, marking the late hour. The quiet strains of Xianqu linger, adding to her allure; her drunken visage, perfectly languid, bears a blush that seems to scorn the prying eyes of others.

A faint fragrance wafts through her light blue silk garments, a beauty too elusive to capture in verse. Each careful step leaves a trace of perfume in the air, and with spirited delight, she has rowed with an orchid oar on several occasions. After feasts that stretch into the night, she catches her lazy reflection in the mirror, surprised by the day's makeup still lingering.

Veiled by a fan, even as the singing subsides, her thoughts drift on, feigning shyness as she arranges the hostas in her hair—a posture befitting a lady of renown. How can

<sup>193</sup> Wang Yuzhen, "生查子," *Guixiu cichao*, fasc. 25, 10.4a. Accessed August 20, 2024.

<sup>194</sup> Xu Naichang (徐乃昌), "Wangyuzhen luezhuan (王毓贞略传) [A Brief Biography of Wang Yuzhen]," *Guixiu cichao*, fasc. 25, 10.3b. Accessed August 20, 2024.

such flower-like beauty diminish as blooms wax and wane? The heart of spring stirs the orioles to sing, leaving uncertain the chance of reunion in this life.<sup>195</sup>

Zhu compares snow to skin and employs the beauty of begonia flowers as a metaphor for a woman's posture. Upon reading the entire poem, the image of a fragile yet subtly melancholic beauty, adorned with exquisite makeup and elegant attire, emerges vividly within the fragrant boudoir. Beautiful women are portrayed as capable of sorrow and indulgence late into the night; when attending banquets or outings, they often appear languid due to their worries. The line “bears a blush that seems to scorn the prying eyes of others” suggests that the beauty's allure attracts the gaze of outsiders, who wish to behold her loveliness, a situation that is, in turn, vexatious for the beauty herself.

How do female authors express *yanqing* in their lyrics? A pertinent example is the renowned mother-daughter creative duo of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties: Shen Yixiu and the Ye sisters. Their life experiences and family backgrounds will be elaborated upon in “Chapter 5.1: Family Education and Growth Background.” For now, let us concentrate on the content of their works. Similar to the previously discussed *yanqing* writings, many of their pieces are titled “Beauty,” with the subjects described being primarily anonymous and unidentified. Shen Yixiu (沈宜修, 1590-1635)的 “Dielianhua: Xiaobi xunxiang enuoyouzhi chuchu ru qiutang kelian nianshier ersi chuangran aizhi fuci,” (蝶戀花：小婢尋香婀娜有致楚楚如秋棠可憐年十二而死愴然哀之賦此) [Butterfly Loves the Flower: A delicate maid went in search of fragrance—graceful and charming, as tender as an autumn crabapple. Alas, she passed away at the age of twelve. Moved with sorrow, I composed this in mourning.] clearly stated in the title that the object he described was a maidservant, and the purpose of writing was to mourn her death:

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<sup>195</sup> Zhu Rouying (朱柔英), “Huanxisha he liangbolong zeng ji (浣溪沙·(又)和梁伯龍贈伎) [Huan Xi Sha: A Reply to Liang Bolong's Gift to a Courtesan],” *Shuangxingguan ji* (雙星館集) [Collected Works of Shuangxing Pavilion] (Yongzheng period (1723-1735)), 雙星館集.16a-16b. Accessed August 12, 2024.

The girl's waist, a blessing from the heavens, sways gracefully, her delicate hair cascading tenderly against the crimson railings. Amidst the orioles' sweet cries, the flowers seem ready to shatter at the lightest touch, while the tender threads of spring are hard to mend. Butterflies flit into her sleeves, yet the east wind tousles the fragile strands of hair. Her eyes, the most enchanting, reflect autumn's waters, glimmering with a pitiful gaze, like raindrops splashing into a pot of rouge.<sup>196</sup>

The concept of *yanqing* in *ci* is primarily manifested in the reluctance to part with a maid, with the lyrical element serving as the focal point. When the writing context shifts from a memorial to the deceased to a casual depiction of daily life, both Shen and her daughter, Ye Xiaolun (葉小鸞, 1616-1632), present *yanqing* works featuring women in their surroundings as subjects of their writing, allowing for a comparative analysis:

Shen Yixiu: The smoke from the dancing sleeves rose gracefully, while wisps of hair danced at her temples. A blush of pink escaped from her emerald skirt, peeking out from behind the cloud-like screen, as the lingering catkins remained unseen. Even after calling a thousand times, she feigned indifference, lazily watching the butterflies, her voice half-coquettish, reminiscent of a warbler. Frustrated, she reluctantly turned to the qin, its strings echoing her silent annoyance.<sup>197</sup>

Ye Xiaolun: She is graceful, her posture lighter than a flower in flight. With a soft blush upon her cheeks, she turns away from the screen, leaning delicately as if concealing a hidden emotion. Her face, a blend of anger and serenity, appears illuminated by a veil of fresh snow. Her voice, akin to a swallow's sweet trill or the shy call of an oriole, carries a languid charm, as if she is too dreamy to tend to the kite.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Shen Yixiu (沈宜修), "Dielianhua: Xiaobi xunxiang enuoyouzhi chuchu ru qiutang kelian nianshier ersi chuangran aizhi fuci (蝶戀花：小婢尋香婀娜有致楚楚如秋棠可憐年十二而死愴然哀之賦此) [Butterfly Loves the Flower: A delicate maid went in search of fragrance—graceful and charming, as tender as an autumn crabapple. Alas, she passed away at the age of twelve. Moved with sorrow, I composed this in mourning.]," *Lichui ci* (鷓鴣吹詞) in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 19, 1.32b-33a.

<sup>197</sup> Shen Yixiu, "Huanxisha: Shinu suichun pogua shi shanzuo jiaohan zhi tai zhunu yongzhi yu yi xizuo (浣溪沙：侍女隨春破瓜時善作嬌憨之態諸女詠之余亦戲作) [Written in jest, following the example of other maidens who composed verses on a handmaid exhibiting charming innocence upon reaching womanhood in spring.]," *Lichui ci* (鷓鴣吹詞) in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 19, 1.7b.

<sup>198</sup> Ye Xiaolun (葉小鸞), "Huanxisha: Tong laingzie xizeng mubi suichun (浣溪沙：同兩姊戲贈母婢隨春) [Playing with My Two Sisters, I Gift a Maid Named Suichun to My Mother]," *Shuxiangge ci* (疎香閣詞) in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 19, 1.5a.

Upon careful comparison of the contents, numerous similarities can be identified. For instance, both ci consist of six lines, with five of those lines concluding with the same characters (輕, 屏, 情, 鶯, 箏). In describing a woman's posture, both employ similar adjectives such as lightness, delicateness, and laziness. The differences, however, lie in the analogies used—flying smoke, floating flowers, and catkins serve as metaphors for lightness—and the distinct focuses in their depictions of the same scene. For example, Shen emphasizes the exposure of a skirt, while Ye highlights the shyness reflected in a woman's reddened cheeks.

There are quite a few ci with beauties as their themes and written by ladies, such as:

Zhong Yun (鍾韞, 1628-1691): Though clad in a thin silk top, a chill still lingers at my fingertips as morning dawns. The reflection in the mirror shows a haggard visage, still too slender and frail, even after makeup; yet I must not forget to draw my brows, for they bring a touch of life to my complexion.<sup>199</sup>

Wu Xiao: In the spring dawn of Jintang, she gently applies her makeup before the mirror. Such exquisite beauty is a rarity in the South. With cardamom knots at her temples and a waist as slender as a willow, she captivates all. As the Luan bird flutters, its fragrance dances like snowflakes, while a single hibiscus blooms amidst the mist. How dearly the common grass cherishes the pearl, longing to purchase the smile of this enchanting beauty.<sup>200</sup>

Gu Zhenli (顧貞立, 1623-1699): Adorned with an orchid, she sings while gathering red beans, her graceful posture revealing all her cares. Climbing high to drink and sing, she urges her companion to return home. The lover, stationed at the frontier, stirs the woman's discontent within her boudoir, carrying it to the azure window.<sup>201</sup>

Shen Zhen (沈榛, 1628-1691): Dazed from her slumber, she moved with steps as graceful as a blooming lotus. She stretched her slender waist languorously in the

<sup>199</sup> Zhong Yun (鍾韞), "Chongdie jin: Meiren xiao zhuang (重疊金：美人曉粧) [The beauty applies her makeup at dawn]," *Meihuayuan shi yu* (梅花園詩餘) [Plum Blossom Garden: A Collection of Ci Poetry] in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 3, 梅花園詩餘.2b.

<sup>200</sup> Wu Xiao, "Yi hu zhu: Ge ji (一斛珠：歌伎) [female entertainer]," *Xiaoxuean shiyu* (嘯雪庵詩餘) [*Leisure Lyrics from the Xiaoxue Hermitage*] in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 13, 嘯雪庵詩餘.8b-9a.

<sup>201</sup> Gu Zhenli (顧貞立), "Qinyuan chun: Ti meiren jian (沁園春：題美人牋) [An Epistolary Poem to a Beautiful Lady]," *Qixiangge ci* (栖香閣詞) [*Ci from the Pavilion of Fragrant Dwelling*] in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 5, 卷下.12b.

breeze, her cheeks flushed with a gentle hue. Inside the tent, her heart yearning to take flight, she adorned herself, arranging hostas and mingling with friends, all while plucking delicate orchids. This enchanting scene, viewed from afar, fills the onlookers with rapture.<sup>202</sup>

Xue Qiong (薛瓊, 1659-?): Her brows are graceful, as the warbler sings softly nearby. She experiments with the jade flute, her red lips tenderly parting to caress the little cherries. ....<sup>203</sup>

Zhang Lingyi (張令儀, 1671-1724): A paper kite escapes the small courtyard, soaring leisurely, drifting like a fleeting memory of a beloved. Her jade-like wrist struggles to hold the myriad silk threads, and with a playful smile, she shifts her steps, feigning annoyance, yet her light form seems almost swept away by the wind. The beauty, unsteady and slightly dizzy, wears a blush that enhances her delicate charm.<sup>204</sup>

Gui Maoyi (歸懋儀, 1762-1832): Crafting each sentence with a graceful, ethereal charm and a clever heart requires deep contemplation, patiently awaiting the sparks of inspiration to dance upon the page.<sup>205</sup>

The works mentioned above are all authored by women. Similar to the poems and ci discussed previously, themes of women's languorous image and shyness remain central. The portrayal of well-dressed women includes recurring elements such as cloud-like hair, slender waists, delicate eyebrows, melodious voices akin to those of orioles, red lips, and rosy cheeks. In contrast, when compared to the works of authors who were prostitutes, the ci discussed here appear significantly more subtle. They contain less explicit erotic content and primarily focus on the beauty and allure of the female form.

As mentioned earlier, in the book *Xiao Tan Luan Shi Hui Ke Ji Xiu Ci*, many ci employ themes centered on women's hair, eyebrows, mouths, eyes, hands, nails, waists, feet,

<sup>202</sup> Shen Zhen (沈榛), "Wushan yudian yun: Meiren (巫山一段雲：美人) [The Beauty]," *Songlai ge shi yu* (松籟閣詩餘) [*Poetic Remnants from Pine Whisper Pavilion*] in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 6, 松籟閣詩餘.4b.

<sup>203</sup> Xue Qiong (薛瓊), "Xiangjian huan: Zeng chui xiao nuzi (相見歡：贈獻簫女子) [Gift to the woman with vertical bamboo flute]," *Jiangxue ci* (絳雪詞) [*Crimson Snow Ci*] in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 6, 絳雪詞.1b.

<sup>204</sup> Zhang Lingyi, "Linjiang xian: Yong meiren fang fengzheng (臨江僊：詠美人放風箏) [Ode to a Beauty Flying a Kite]," *Duchuang shi yu* (蠹窗詩餘) [*Surplus Poems from the Bookworm's Window*] in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 5, 蠹窗詩餘.8a-b.

<sup>205</sup> Gui Maoyi (歸懋儀), "Feng die ling: Ti meiren bian mian (風蝶令：題美人便面) [Inscription on the Beauty's Face]," *Ting xue ci* (聽雪詞) in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 2, 聽雪詞.4b.

and even breath to craft erotic narratives.<sup>206</sup> Descriptions of the female body from a female perspective tend to be more restrained and reserved compared to the explicit portrayals of private parts typically found in male-authored texts.<sup>207</sup> Regarding the choice of *ci-pai* (lyric forms), “qinyuan chun” appears with notable frequency, which may be linked to Liu Guo’s erotic *ci* classic, *qinyuan chun*.<sup>208</sup> This reflects the tendency of women to imitate and adhere to the male-dominated literary tradition in their creative endeavors. Such inheritance has been adjusted to exhibit a degree of introversion, influenced by the social positioning of women.

The following are examples of boudoir *ci* that reference body parts:

Zhang Lingyi: Tashaxin: Jinpen mu fa (踏莎行：金盆沐髮) [washing hair in a golden basin]: The jade mirror gleams with dawn’s first light, while fragrant orchids steam, their waters bright. Her emerald hair, just let down from its grace, falls like fresh morning, a soft, sleepy face. Silken strands drip, as if washed by the stream, ink stains ripple softly, a shimmering dream. Feathers scatter, like birds in disarray, while damp clouds brush low, veiling the day. In the gentle breeze, she laughs, a sweet tease, as the tender lad smooths garments with ease. So delicate, she leans on the railing there, like warmth from hot springs, a comfort so rare.<sup>209</sup>

Zhang Lingyi: Tashaxin: Yue lian yun mian (月奩勻面) [The moonlight gently illuminates the even face]: With gentle strokes, her makeup light, a new day reveals her charming delight. Frosty veils enhance her radiant grace, as jeweled windows reflect the morning’s embrace. Why does change appear so clearly in sight?.....<sup>210</sup>

Zhang Lingyi: Tashaxin: Daimei pin se (黛眉顰色) [the color of dark eyebrows and cheeks]: A few light strokes, balanced and graceful. Twin peaks, verdant and lush, reveal a myriad of scenes. Quiet emotions gently unfold here. The ailing heart of Xi Shi (西施) lingers still. A crisp melody echoes, enchanting the soul.<sup>211</sup>

<sup>206</sup> Same as note 49. Zhang Hongsheng, “[A Study of Romantic Yongwu Ci by Women Writers in the Qing Dynasty] 論清代女詞人的豔情詠物詞,” 531.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Zhang Lingyi, “Tashaxin: Jinpen mu fa (踏莎行：金盆沐髮) [washing hair in a golden basin],” *Duchuang shi yu* in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 5, 蠹窗詩餘.5b.

<sup>210</sup> Zhang Lingyi, “Tashaxin: Yue lian yun mian (月奩勻面) [The moonlight gently illuminates the even face],” *Duchuang shi yu* in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 5, 蠹窗詩餘.5b-6a.

<sup>211</sup> Zhang Lingyi, “Tashaxin: Daimei pin se (黛眉顰色) [the color of dark eyebrows and cheeks],” *Duchuang shi yu* in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 5, 蠹窗詩餘.6a.

Sun Yunfeng : Qinyun chun (沁園春): Bin (鬢) [temples]: She gently lifts her hair, combing through her silky locks, her forehead adorned with delicate ornaments. She lowers her head, fearing her headpiece may slip, in the cool autumn breeze. A light touch of makeup graces her face, her green hairpin faintly shimmering, but the northern wind easily slips through her thin adornments. She wraps herself in sable fur, revealing the soft curve of her neck, and her fragrant cheeks faintly blush. Half-reclined against the screen, she recalls their first encounter, her charm mingled with a graceful languor. Surprised, she finds her golden hairpin slipping, and a strand of hair gently falls loose.<sup>212</sup>

Sun Yunfeng : Qinyun chun: Mei (眉) [eyebrows] : Her eyebrows, slender like moth wings, green as coiled hairpins, curve gently like willow leaves. She recalls herself, gracefully leaning against the embroidered screen, the moonlight crossing the autumn waters. Lazily, she rises from her brocade quilt, her dark brows, like mist-covered spring hills. She opens the newly popular sheet music again, playing with the latest style, as her companions carefully observe her skill. In that intoxicating moment, she sits by the green-gauze window, revisiting her painting, savoring it repeatedly. With deep affection, she plucks the strings of her lute, her cheeks tinged with a rosy blush, while her peachy complexion and dark brows appear even more radiant. She smiles, a smile that could charm cities, unfolding with such endearing grace. Holding her heart in silence, even her furrowed brows evoke tenderness. Her elegant hair frames her graceful figure, long strands falling like clouds.<sup>213</sup>

Sun Yunhe: Qinyun chun: Ko (口) [mouth]: She lightly applies a soft red hue, her beauty as radiant as the legendary Fan Su. A hint of crimson gathers on her lips, like beloved apricot blossoms blooming beside a cottage. As she plays the flute, her breath seems faint, while crabapple flowers sway in the wind. She holds a bamboo flute, producing a sound that is pure and clear. Her jade-like fingers gently press against her cheek, and with graceful elegance, she uses a golden hairpin to clean her teeth. When she reveals her cherry-like lips, half-exposed, her makeup is complete. She then softly sucks the tip of a spiral brush, leaving it tinged with a faint blue hue.<sup>214</sup>

Sun Yunhe : Qinyun chun: Zhi jia (指甲, nail) : She recalls sitting quietly by the green window, gently testing the orchid-scented bathwater, while the silver screen softly sways and the crimson candle flickers lightly. She adores the rouge, dyed like

<sup>212</sup> Sun Yunfeng, “Qinyuan chun: Bin (沁園春：鬢),” *Xiangyunguan ci* (湘筠館詞) [*Ci from Xiangyun Pavilion*] in Xu Naichang, *un*, fasc 17, 卷上.4b.

<sup>213</sup> Sun Yunfeng, “Qinyuan chun: Mei (沁園春：眉),” *Xiangyunguan ci* in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 17, 卷上.4a-b.

<sup>214</sup> Sun Yunhe, “Qinyuan chun: Ko (沁園春：口),” *Tingyulou ci* (聽雨樓詞) [*Ci from the Listening-to-Rain Pavilion*] in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 11, 聽雨樓詞. 上.2a.

celestial blossoms, and occasionally picks up the scented powder, dabbing a touch of tortoiseshell-colored specks onto her face. Resting her chin for a long time, a faint mark appears across her brow, slanting like the shadow of a crescent moon lightly printed on her cheek.<sup>215</sup>

The aforementioned works explicitly identify the female body parts they aim to describe (mouth, hair, eyebrows, and face) directly in their titles, making them bolder than *yanqing* poetry. In terms of descriptive detail, these works also provide more in-depth and meticulous portrayals of the beauty of these features. However, the overall image remains largely the same, invariably emphasizing qualities such as slenderness, fragility, delicacy, softness, lightness, and grace.

Sun Yunfeng and Ye Wanwan (葉紈紈) both have ci titled “fen pu (粉撲, powder puff)”, a women’s makeup tool.

Ye Wanwan (1610-1633): Sanzi ling: Yong fenpu (三字令：詠粉撲): Her beauty makes one wonder if she is a reflection in a mirror or the roundness of a toad. She exudes the most enchanting and graceful charm. Beneath her red sleeves, her figure before the green window evokes tender admiration. She shyly ties a brocade sash, envious of the splendor of floral adornments. After a bath infused with orchid essence, she reveals a delicate form akin to the spring season. She gently caresses herself, applying vibrant powder to enhance her jade-like skin. The fragrance of musk wafts through the air, spreading an alluring aroma that lightly drifts through the Xiang curtain.<sup>216</sup>

Sun Yunfeng: When she wakes several times, the impressions on her pillow are still visible, and after multiple dances, she feels tired, with fragrant sweat lightly sticking to her skin. . . . . Despite her moody state, she lazily wipes away the sorrow from her brows; her willow-like eyebrows appear lighter, and the deep influence of wine makes her shy, with her cheeks blooming like apricot flowers. After her bath, she stands before a silver screen, her makeup complete, with pearl dust covering her chest, and her red garment highlighting her elegance. Unforgettable is the close view of her slender figure, like gazing beside a hibiscus mirror.<sup>217</sup>

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 聽雨樓詞.上.2a-b.

<sup>216</sup> Ye Wanwan (葉紈紈), “Sanzi ling: Yong fenpu (三字令：詠粉撲),” *Fangxuexuan ci* (芳雪軒詞) [*Ci from the Fragrant Snow Pavilion*] in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 19, 1.6a-b.

<sup>217</sup> Sun Yunfeng, “Qinyun chun: Fenpu (沁園春：粉撲),” *Xiangyunguan ci* in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi*

Centering on the delicate art of women's cosmetics, these verses portray the beauty of a woman bathing and adorning herself before the mirror. The soft grace of femininity intertwines with the wisps of fragrant powder and perfume smoke, creating a shared scene of elegance and allure in both poems.

In summary, whether through depictions of the female body or the juxtaposition of women's accessories with their physical appearance, these literary portrayals ultimately reflect the aesthetic ideals of their time. Similar to Japan in the mid-17th to late 18th century, where the publication of *bijin-ga* (beautiful women paintings) conveyed trends in beauty standards,<sup>218</sup> Chinese women's literary works, even if not explicitly intended to disseminate such ideals, implicitly embodied similar cultural messages.

### 1.3. Novels

The development of novels has progressed from short stories and notebooks in the early stages to longer chapters in later stages. Chinese novels have gradually evolved to encompass richer content and structure. During the Wei and Jin Dynasties, novels included a variety of genres such as popular narratives about individuals (志人小說, *Zhiren Novels*) and stories about gods and ghosts (志怪小說, *Zhiguai Novels*). In the Tang Dynasty, the scope of writing expanded to include themes such as romantic relationships, heroic adventures, and historical legends, which became popular choices. During this period, novels with erotic content also began to emerge.<sup>219</sup> If one categorizes the development of Chinese erotic novels into stages, the middle and late Ming Dynasty can be considered the period of maturation.

Notable examples from this era include the classic short, medium, and long novels 僧尼孽海

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*huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 17, 卷下.1b-2a.

<sup>218</sup> Noriko Suzuki (鈴木則子), "[Beauty in the Mirror: The Changes in Beauty Awareness from the Makeup Books of the Edo Period] 鏡中美女——從江戶時代的化妝書看美容意識的變遷," in Li Zhende (李貞德) ed., 性別、身體與醫療 [Gender, Body and Medicine] (Taipei: Linking Publishing Company, 2008), 193-4.

<sup>219</sup> Zhang Tingxing, *History of Ancient Chinese Erotic Novels*, 7.

[*Monks and Nuns in a Sea of Sins*], *Ruyijun Zhuan* (如意君傳) [*The Tale of Master Ru Yi*], 繡榻野史 [*Embroidered Couch Unofficial History*], *Langshi* (浪史) [*The History of Dissipation*], *Jinpingmei* (金瓶梅) [*The Plum in the Golden Vase*], and the legendary work *Jianden xinhua* (剪燈新話) [*New Stories Written while Trimming the Wick*]<sup>220</sup> were all written at this time.<sup>221</sup> These works demonstrate a mature and flexible development in terms of length, featuring diverse and vividly characterized figures, clear novel structures, and even chapter-based frameworks that ensure narrative coherence.

Regarding the authorship of erotic novels, it is notable that all the authors of the aforementioned classic works are male. Female characters, although present in these novels, are primarily portrayed as figures within the narrative. While there are poems, lyrics, and dialogues written from a female perspective, these are ultimately projections of the male authors. Female authors, on the other hand, have predominantly focused on shorter forms of writing such as poems, lyrics, and songs in the realm of erotic literature.

It is noteworthy that, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter regarding the definitions of *yan* and *yanqing*, there are works centered on themes of romantic love between men and women, those depicting female images, and those that intertwine elements of desire. By categorizing these works and considering the gender of the authors, one can distinctly observe that female authors are less represented in certain types of novels, particularly those that focus on “the description of mixed elements of desire.” However, this does not imply that all *yanqing* novels primarily revolve around explicit narratives of desire. *Yanqing* novels should be regarded as a “neutral term.”<sup>222</sup> In other words, it is precisely the coexistence of

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<sup>220</sup> Qu You (瞿佑, 1341-1427), in his work *New Stories Written while Trimming the Wick*, includes a total of 22 short stories. The themes predominantly depict interactions between humans and supernatural beings, showcasing characteristics that stand in contrast to traditional concepts of propriety, reflecting a more liberated and imaginative spirit.

<sup>221</sup> Zhang Tingxing, *History of Ancient Chinese Erotic Novels*, 8.

<sup>222</sup> Zhang Tingxing, *History of Ancient Chinese Erotic Novels*, 32.

*yan* and *qing* that allows *yanqing* novels to simultaneously highlight characters' aesthetics through depictions of desire associated with *yan* and to reflect on moral considerations of interpersonal relationships through the emotional portrayals linked to *qing*.

Returning to the discussion of the characteristics of *yanqing* novels during the Ming and Qing dynasties. “聯芳樓記” [Lianfang Tower] is a short story included in *New Stories Written while Trimming the Wick*. Not only does the novel as a whole describe the protagonist Xue and two women (a pair of sisters, called Chang Daughter and Second daughter)'s erotic communication actions, and several erotic poems are used to explain the interactions and moods between the three of them. Whether the poems written by the sisters:

The smoke from the precious incense slowly dissipates, and the candle's shadow hangs low beside the pillow. The screen gently sways, making the draped curtain flutter slightly. The scene of elegance is like a fish swimming in water, moving east and then west, constantly shifting.<sup>223</sup>

It is fortunate to meet our lover, rather than like Wang Ziyou took advantage of his interest to visit Dai Andao and unfortunately failed to meet him.<sup>224</sup> Dust has settled on the silk stockings, stirring the soul, while the jade hairpin has fallen beside the pillow, leaving the hair disheveled. When the springtime news is revealed again, I will not regret the fleeting moment of tonight's decision.<sup>225</sup>

Or the poem by Xue: “By chance, I found myself at the summit of Peng Mountain, where hibiscus and peonies bloom on either side. I feel like a butterfly savoring the scent, fluttering through the flowered expanse, while the days drift by in endless rounds.”<sup>226</sup> Although it may appear to be a description of love, the text actually incorporates elements of realism and erotic content. It is “associated with both classical embellishment and the sensual

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<sup>223</sup> Qu You, *New Stories Written while Trimming the Wick* (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Languages Bookstore, June 1936), 25.

<sup>224</sup> The story of Wang Ziyou visited Dai Andao unsuccessfully is from *Shishuo sinyu* (世說新語：任誕篇). Wang, feeling inspired on a snowy night, decided to take a small boat to visit his good friend Dai. Upon arriving at the doorstep, however, Wang paused and refrained from knocking on the door to announce his visit to Dai. The reason was that Wang felt he had sufficiently fulfilled his desire by arriving at Dai's home; whether or not he actually saw Dai had become inconsequential.

<sup>225</sup> Qu You, *New Stories Written while Trimming the Wick*, 26.

<sup>226</sup> Qu You, *New Stories Written while Trimming the Wick*, 25-6.

representation of romantic love.”<sup>227</sup> The depiction of the freedom and joy experienced by flowers, fish, and butterflies is a metaphor for the erotic interactions between men and women. This metaphorical writing technique is both bold and direct, conveying the protagonists’ confessions of desire. For example, phrases such as “the screen next to the pillow in the middle of the night reflects the rhinoceros horn pillars shaking the curtain,” “My soul was wandering in the time spent with my lover, and the swaying jade hairpin fell on the disheveled hair,” and “I was like a butterfly stealing sweet honey, playing wildly among the flowers for several days,” use realistic and metaphorical techniques to depict intimate scenes. These descriptions subtly invite readers to use their imagination. Qu You’s works may be seen as a reaction to the “return to Confucian values” policy vigorously promoted by Emperor Hongwu (1368-1398) at the time.<sup>228</sup>

If the book *Monks and Nuns in a Sea of Sins* shows the public the fall of seemingly solemn religious places and people in the face of sexual desire, the joke collections of the Ming and Qing Dynasties also have similar manifestations. In the *Xiaolin guangji* (笑林廣記) [*Extensive Records of the Forest of Laughter*], a collection of jokes published in 1799 (during the Qianlong period), jokes such as ‘幾世修,’ ‘陽硬,’ ‘開葷,’ and ‘祭器’ describe open conversations between monks and novices about sexual relations. The sexual organs, buttocks, number of sexual reactions are mentioned bluntly; these descriptions all reverse the solemn impression of Buddhism represented by the monks, as well as the public’s respect for the monks and nuns class.<sup>229</sup> Many popular novels of the Ming and Qing Dynasties feature

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<sup>227</sup> Sun Chang Kang-i, and Stephen Owen eds, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature Volume II, From 1375, 9.*

<sup>228</sup> Sun Chang Kang-i, and Stephen Owen eds, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature Volume II, From 1375, 9.*

<sup>229</sup> Huang Kehwu, “[The Body and Sexuality in Ming-Qing Era Jokes: An Analysis Centered on the *Xiaolin Guangji*] 明清笑話中的身體與情慾——以笑林廣記為中心之分析,” 134-5. Regarding the descriptions of several jokes mentioned (concerning genitalia, buttocks, and the frequency of sexual responses), a few excerpts are provided here for reference; for more detailed content, please refer to the cited chapters. For example: “One summer day (a monk) saw the owner of the house sleeping on a chair with a huge penis exposed. (暑天見主人

writing about masculinity, with the peak from the Chongzhen period to the Yongzheng period.<sup>230</sup> Men's style (男風) writing not only highlights the creative phenomenon with “homosexual sexual desire” as the theme, but also reflects the social outlook: the authenticity of same-sex sexual relations among monks in temples. This kind of perspective and gender in erotic writing also shows the diversity of gender projections under the erotic theme.

癡婆子傳 [*The Tale of the Infatuated Woman*] stands out among the many surviving *yanqing* novels due to its narrative voice, which is presented from a female perspective. Although it does not delve deeply into women's recognition of their own value or their resistance to social norms,<sup>231</sup> its unique setting—urban in nature, featuring a lower-class female protagonist—highlights the popularity of urban commoners as the main characters in vernacular fiction during the late Ming Dynasty.<sup>232</sup>

During the Chongzhen period of the Ming Dynasty, the turbulent conditions of the late Ming era did not diminish the development of erotic novels. This trend continued into the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty, which can be considered a stable stage of development. During this time, the language used in erotic novels transitioned from classical Chinese to vernacular, and the chapter structure became more refined and complete.<sup>233</sup> For instance, works such as 隋煬帝豔史 [*The Erotic History of Emperor Yang of Sui*], 肉蒲團 [*The Carnal Prayer Mat*], 燈月緣 [*The Moonlit Lantern*], and 歡喜冤家 [*Joyful Enemy*], along with 螢窗異草 [*Strange Grasses in the Candlelight*] from the Qianlong era, employ polarized corporeal writing—extreme pleasures and beauty juxtaposed with profound

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睡在醉翁以上，露出陽物甚偉”(“幾世修”)、“No other items are needed to offer sacrifices to the Buddha. It is enough to offer your buttocks on the Buddha's throne. (享祀不須他物，只將你窟臀供座上足矣)”(“祭器”)

<sup>230</sup> Xue Yingjie, “Homosexual Relationships among Monks and Literati Power in Late Ming, Early Qing Popular Fiction,” *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies*, no.146 (March 2018), 92. Accessed July 12, 2024. <https://www.fnjlc.com/CN/abstract/abstract786.shtml>

<sup>231</sup> Zhang Tingxing, *History of Ancient Chinese Erotic Novels*, 26.

<sup>232</sup> Wu Cuncun, “Late Ming Urban Life and Wanton Women in Huang Fangyin's *Short Plays*,” in *Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature*, vol. 8 (2017), 105-6. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004340626\\_006](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004340626_006).

<sup>233</sup> Zhang Tingxing, *History of Ancient Chinese Erotic Novels*, 8.

pain and ugliness—to highlight the internal tensions of culture and the realities of the existential world.<sup>234</sup> *Yanqing* novels convey the author’s ambivalence toward human morality and the aesthetic appreciation of the opposite sex.<sup>235</sup> Although the depiction of the female body may be seen as a mere expression of sexual desire, the portrayal of men and women immersed in the world of carnal pleasures, contrasted with the tension between traditional morality, the moral perspectives of the Three Teachings, and romantic love, also served as a challenge to social norms.

What is the greatest difference in the depiction of women, who are the central figures in *yanqing* literature, between the male and female perspectives? If passive, bashful, and delicate traits are considered as indicators of whether these portrayals are shaped by male desire, it indeed offers a lens for examining the presence of the patriarchal gaze.<sup>236</sup> However, as observed in the aforementioned works, women seen through female authors’ eyes are also often portrayed as delicate. This can largely be understood as a reflection of the yet-to-be-awakened female consciousness, as well as the inherent reality of the lives of women in secluded quarters or courtesans. Both groups were expected to embody gentleness and grace rather than strength and independence. Whether in expressions of longing from within the boudoir, seductive allure, or *yanqing*, the constant feature is the portrayal of women as the narrative subject, while the change is the gradual blurring—and even merging—of boundaries after the Tang dynasty.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Kao Kueihui, “A Continuous Debate of Yan (sexual desire) and Yi (oddity) -A discussion of Ying Chuang Yi Chao, a Novel of Puian of Ching Dynasty,” 141.

<sup>235</sup> Tingxing Zhang, *History of Ancient Chinese Erotic Novels*, 26.

<sup>236</sup> Li Peihuan (李佩璇), “[The Intertextuality between Li He’s ‘Song of a Beauty Combing Her Hair’ and the Poems of the Same Title] 論〈美人梳頭歌〉歷代同題詩作之互文關係及文學史意義,” *Dong Hwa Journal of Chinese Studies*, no. 16 (December 2012), 174. Accessed September 10, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.6999/DHJCS.201212.0147>.

<sup>237</sup> Zhu Chong I (朱崇儀), “[The Subject of Gui-yuan Poetry or Erotic Poetry] 閨怨詩與豔詩的‘主體,’” *Studies in Literature and History*, no. 29 (June 1999), 84. Accessed June 23, 2024. <https://core.ac.uk/works/24305665/>.

As for the descriptions of women's bodies, while there is a distinction between erotic and non-erotic depictions, more often than not, they emphasize traditional feminine characteristics, also encompassing elements of emotional expression. Eros is merely one among many forms of emotion, rather than the central or defining one. Therefore, is *yanqing* necessarily erotic? The answer is no. Moreover, if we categorize works by the author's gender, many female authors' *yanqing* poems and verses are more centered on emotional expression than eroticism. This highlights how the emotions expressed in women's literary works often reflect deeper spiritual and psychological dimensions, rather than being driven solely by physical desire.

## 2. Renaissance: Late Ming period

### 2.1. Background: Political Factors and Industrial Development

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the concept of “virtuous talents” was confined to “knowledge of classics and traditional literary knowledge.”<sup>238</sup> This narrow definition may have led writers with more open and diverse literary perspectives to explore alternative directions or genres in their creative work.

The prohibition of eroticism in the Ming Dynasty laws can also be seen from the treatment of lustful behaviors in monks and Daoists:

Any monk or Daoist who marries a wife or concubine shall be punished with eighty strokes of the cane and required to renounce their religious status. The family of the woman involved shall also bear the same guilt, and the couple must separate. If the head of the temple or Daoist monastery is aware of this, they shall also be held accountable, while those who are unaware will not be punished.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Ho Pingti, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911* (New York: Science Editions, 1964), 11.

<sup>239</sup> Ying Jia (應檣), “婚姻: 僧道娶妻 [Marriage: Monks marry wives]” and “犯姦: 居喪及僧道犯姦 [Adultery: Adultery during mourning and by monks and nuns],” *Daminglu shiyi* (大明律釋義) [*Interpretation of the Ming Dynasty Law*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1997), 61 & 199.

For monks who failed to abide by the precepts of transcendence, the Ming Dynasty prescribed punishments by law, which also reflected the ruler's stance: the sanctity of etiquette, law, and precepts.

In the imperial palaces, the same moral precepts were also reflected in the education provided to eunuchs within the internal study halls. During the mid-to-late Ming dynasty, Confucian officials, following the teachings of Wang Yangming, promoted the principles of “filial piety, fraternal respect, loyalty, trustworthiness, propriety, righteousness, integrity, and a sense of shame” (孝、弟、忠、信、禮、義、廉、恥) as the core moral doctrines for educating eunuchs.<sup>240</sup> However, why was there a continued focus on the moral education of eunuchs? This was closely related to the growing power of eunuchs, which expanded as the Ming dynasty's cabinet system was abolished. Scholars found it difficult to implement their practical governance ideas in the face of increasing competition with the eunuchs. Thus, educating and morally guiding powerful eunuchs to realize their ideals was considered more feasible than bypassing the eunuchs and directly monitoring the emperor.<sup>241</sup>

In terms of political education policies and legal decrees, Confucian orthodoxy and values were upheld by certain factions throughout the late Ming period. However, in light of the emperor's corrupt governance and the growing openness of social customs, the traditional frameworks were no longer unassailable.

## 2.2. *Intellectuals' Theory of Eros*

“How can one address a husband's disrespect? If a husband and wife are incompatible, it reflects the beginning of human relations, from which roles such as ruler, minister, father, and son emerge. Thus, no saint or king from ancient times has succeeded without first bringing order to their own family before extending it to the

<sup>240</sup> Wu Zhaofeng (吳兆豐), “[The “Movement” to Promote the Eunuch's Moral Improvement in the System of Neishu tang by the Mid-Late Ming Scholar-Officials] 中晚明士大夫教化宦官 “運動”：以內書堂為中心,” *Journal of Chinese Studies* (中國文化研究所學報), no. 66 (January 2018), 82.

<sup>241</sup> Wu Zhaofeng, “The “Movement” to Promote the Eunuch's Moral Improvement in the System of Neishu tang by the Mid-Late Ming Scholar-Officials,” 88.

world. The teachings that advocate for starting within the family and expanding to the world are said to be the highest ideals, though they may render everyone inadequate until death. This is considered pure and enlightened. Zhuzi remarked, “It is fortunate that few follow it; if everyone adhered to it, it would not surpass the life of a hundred years.” The concept of Buddha is elusive. Even if someone is on the verge of killing their own kin, they should not be swayed. If they are swayed, it indicates they have not eradicated their desires. Achieving Buddhahood is challenging, which is why there are no truly benevolent individuals who do not deeply reject it.”<sup>242</sup>

Xu Yezhao (徐葉昭),<sup>243</sup> a female writer from the Qing Dynasty, offered several pieces of advice in a letter to her sister. Among these, the admonition to “abandon sexual desire” is prominently featured at the beginning. This advice is rooted in the arguments of Zhu Xi, a prominent Neo-Confucian scholar from the Song Dynasty. Zhu Xi argued that to become a benevolent gentleman, one must rid oneself of sexual desire. For instance, a monk who has not renounced worldly desires cannot practice Zen or achieve Buddhahood. Xu Yezhao’s reference to Zhu Xi’s arguments in her advice to her relatives underscores both her endorsement of Zhu Xi’s theories and their enduring influence.

Even during the Qing Dynasty, both male and female writers continued to be influenced by Confucian etiquette, law, and ethics when addressing issues of sex. Are sexual desire and eroticism inherently negative aspects that must be avoided? Since the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, have some intellectuals and literati challenged traditional concepts of etiquette, law, and morality, and proposed new perspectives on these issues?

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<sup>242</sup> Xu Yezhao, “Yu damei shu (與大妹書) [Letter to My Elder Younger Sister]”, *Zhisizhai xuewengao* (職思齋學文稿) [*Collected Manuscripts from Zhisizhai Studio*]: 1juan (1794 Qing Dynasty, 清乾隆甲寅年(1794)年刻本), 1.55a-1.55b.

<sup>243</sup> Xu Yezhao (1729-?), female, courtesy name Kezhuang (克莊), literary name Tingsong zhuren (聽松主人), was a native of Wucheng (present-day Huzhou, Zhejiang). Related materials: She authored *Zhisizhai xuewengao* (職思齋學文稿) [*Collected Manuscripts from Zhisizhai Studio*] in one volume. Records of her works can be found in *Huzhou fuzhi* (湖州府志) [*Huzhou Gazetteer*], *Hangzhou fuzhi* (杭州府志) [*Hangzhou Gazetteer*], and *Xiaodaixuan lun shi* (小黛軒論詩) [*Xiaodaixuan Poetry Criticism*]. There is also a self-preface by Xu Yezhao. <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/details-poet.php?poetID=4125&showbio=1&showanth=1&showshihuaon=1&language=eng>

To begin, one should examine the factions and divisions within Confucianism during the Ming Dynasty as presented in *Scholarly Annals of Ming Confucians* (明儒學案)<sup>244</sup>, authored by Huang Zongxi (黃宗羲, 1610-1695), a prominent philosopher from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. *Scholarly Annals of Ming Confucians* is a comprehensive work that consolidates various schools of Yangming's theory of mind while also reviewing and assessing their theories and shortcomings.<sup>245</sup> Huang agrees with the Mencian idea of "all principles returning to the original mind" and acknowledges the subjectivity of the mind.<sup>246</sup>

In an era where Confucianism remained the mainstream, figures like Li Zhi (李贄, 1527–1602) and Wang Gen (王艮, 1483–1540), members of the Taizhou School, stood out as unconventional:

The human heart is naturally inclined to joy, but it is often bound by selfish desires. When these desires first arise, one's innate sense of conscience perceives them. Once recognized, the desires are dispelled, and the heart returns to its original state of contentment. This joy is the joy found in learning, and learning itself is pursued for this joy. If there is no joy, there is no true learning; and without learning, one cannot truly experience joy.<sup>247</sup>

Taking Wang Gen's 樂學歌 [*Songs of Joy in Learning*] as an example, the Taizhou School emphasized the practice of virtue and joy. While these two concepts may seem contradictory, in fact, they are not.<sup>248</sup> The pursuit of truth and joy in life occurs naturally, spontaneously, and without deliberate design. Private desires exist, and so does the joy in life. However, to pursue true joy, one's actions must be freed from the constraints of desire. Therefore, under the call for the joy of the world as a fundamental truth, the bondage of desire must be broken.

<sup>244</sup> Huang Zongxi (黃宗羲), noted by Mou Tienshou (繆天授), edited by Y. W. Wong and King Chu, *Mingru xuean* (明儒學案) [*Scholarly Annals of Ming Confucians*] (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, June 1931).

<sup>245</sup> Lao Szekwang, 新編中國哲學史 三下 (*New Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy, Volume 3, Part 2*), 380.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Wang Gen (王艮), edited by Sun Yuanding (孫元鼎), "卷之四: 雜著," *Wangxinzhai quanji* (王心齋全集) [*The Complete Collection of Wang Xinzai's Works*], Kyoto: Kawakatsukohodo (川勝鴻寶堂) (1848), 5.

<sup>248</sup> Tang Junyi (唐君毅), 中國哲學原論 原性篇 (*The Original Theory of Chinese Philosophy*) (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2005), 302.

One of the members of the school, Li Zhi, faced severe criticism, with some even advocating for the destruction of his works.<sup>249</sup> In his most famous piece, 童心說 [*Explanation of the Childlike Heart-Mind*], Li emphasized that “夫童心者，真心也” [The childlike heart-mind is the genuine hear-mind.]<sup>250</sup> He argued that individuals should seek their original and authentic heart, free from the influences of learned doctrines and teachings, especially the Six Classics, the Analects, and Mencius.<sup>251</sup> This perspective sparked much controversy, as it challenged the long-standing reverence for the teachings of Confucius and Mencius.

Even within the Taizhou School, which also emphasized returning to the true heart and acknowledging desires, there was no full endorsement of indulgence in desire. However, Li Zhi's theoretical breakthrough rang the bell for a longing to question and break free from the ethical frameworks of society. In particular, his proposition that “人欲即天理” [human desires are heavenly principles] became widely referenced in late Ming society, providing intellectual backing for the flourishing of works dealing with themes of sexual desire during that period.<sup>252</sup>

It is precisely because the foundation of social stability rests on the principles of ritual propriety (*li*) that *yanqing* novels, which challenge these principles, gained both significance and an audience. These novels offered readers a form of sexual behavior and satisfaction that transcended traditional rights and obligations.<sup>253</sup> *Yanqing* novels moved from the private

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<sup>249</sup> Li Zhi, Rebecca Handler-Spitz, Pauline C Lee, and Haun Saussy, *A Book to Burn and a Book to Keep (Hidden) : Selected Writings*, New York: Columbia University Press (2016), XV.

<sup>250</sup> Li Zhi, *A Book to Burn and a Book to Keep (Hidden) : Selected Writings*, 107.

<sup>251</sup> Li Zhi, *A Book to Burn and a Book to Keep (Hidden) : Selected Writings*, 109.

<sup>252</sup> Zeng Qingyu, “[The “Sexual” Writing in “Jin Ping Mei”- From the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics] 从接受美学视域看《金瓶梅》中的“性”书写,” *Journal of Sinological Studies* 10 (2019), 14. <https://ajap.um.edu.my/index.php/joss/article/view/35579>.

<sup>253</sup> Huang Tungyang, “[Parables of Human Nature: Interpretations of the Late-Ming Erotic Novel *Monks and Nuns in a Sea of Sins*] 人性的寓言—明末豔情小說《僧尼孽海》對僧尼持守色戒之詮解,” *Chinese Studies* 30, no.3 (2012), 101.

realm of content into public circulation, only to return to the buyer's private domain as intimate, desire-infused reading material. As a result, many *yanqing* novels became "sexual textbooks."<sup>254</sup> The literati's pursuit of the true heart and their challenge to Confucian traditions seemed to resonate with the market for extreme *yanqing* literature, reflecting another facet of late Ming society's shifting cultural atmosphere.

### 3. Challenges and Breakthroughs: Until the Mid-Qing Dynasty (Yong-Qian Period)

#### 3.1. Policy Restrictions and the Promotion of Confucian Ethics

Despite the impact of policies, political situations, and ethical concepts, it cannot be denied that the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties is the glorious era of brothel culture and famous prostitutes. This can be seen from the publication of *Qinhuai bayan tuyong* (秦淮八艷圖詠) [*Eight Beauties in Qinhuai*], a book containing the stories of eight famous prostitutes in the Qinhuai area during the era.<sup>255</sup>

However, with the change of dynasties, political transitions significantly affected the fate of women. The proximity of brothels and entertainment venues to noble residences reflects the intertwining of courtesan culture and Ming dynasty history. At the same time, the courtesans and noblewomen residing within these spaces faced the prospect of being conscripted as concubines or forcibly abducted by the Qing soldiers during the turmoil of the late Ming period.<sup>256</sup> Official brothels, originally established in Nanjing during the Ming dynasty, evolved into the center of the courtesan industry during the Jiajing and Wanli eras.<sup>257</sup> However, as the Qing government imposed increasingly stringent legal restrictions on prostitutes, courtesan culture gradually declined.<sup>258</sup> The flourishing of Ming dynasty

<sup>254</sup> Wu Yifang, "Female Sexual Enlightenment in the Male Imagination: The Case of Ming and Qing Dynasty Erotic Texts," 62.

<sup>255</sup> Masako Kohama, *Gender History in China*, 382.

<sup>256</sup> Li Waiyee, *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature*, 348.

<sup>257</sup> Ouyang Zhen, *Research on Female Poets in Brothels in Ming Dynasty*, 40.

<sup>258</sup> Masako Kohama, and Linda Grove, eds. *Gender History in China*. English edition. Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto

courtesans who gained fame through their literary talents became difficult to replicate in the Qing era.

The stringent laws of the Qing dynasty were also reflected in the control of book content. The rulers employed severe measures to deal with “淫詞小說” (licentious novels), granting legal legitimacy to the banning of such texts through regulations.<sup>259</sup> The Qing emperors, upholding conservative Confucian values, sought to suppress the indulgent tendencies of *shidafu*.<sup>260</sup> During the reigns of the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors (1652-1754), any content unrelated to Confucian or classical scholarship that threatened the authority of the Qing government was classified as licentious novels.<sup>261</sup> It is worth considering why, despite the issuance of these prohibitions, enforcement continued for over a century. The publication of licentious books by private persons persisted.<sup>262</sup> The government could not effectively counter these grassroots movements solely through prohibitive measures.

Even in the late Qing dynasty, in 1868, a Jiangsu provincial official, Ding Richang (丁日昌, 1823-1882), issued a prohibition order in his jurisdiction.<sup>263</sup> The list of banned books included novels that had already been regarded as *yanqing* (licentious) during the Kangxi era, such as *Xiuta yeshi*, *Langshi*, *Rou pu tuan*, *Huanxi yuanjia*, *Jin ping mei*, and *Deng cao heshang*.<sup>264</sup> The government continuously sought to suppress grassroots *yanqing*

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University Press, 2021, 380.

<sup>259</sup> Sun Ru (孙儒), “[Research on Order Construction of the Qing Dynasty Book Censorship Activities from the Perspective of Document Control Theory] 文献控制论视角下清代禁书活动的秩序建构研究,” *Library Science Research & Work*, no. 6 (2017), 24. Accessed September 24, 2024. <https://bjb.zjlib.cn/CN/abstract/abstract256.shtml>.

<sup>260</sup> Wu Renshu, *Shechi de Nüren: Ming Qing Shiqi Jiangnan Funü de Xiaofei Wenhua*, 64.

<sup>261</sup> Timothy Brook, “Censorship in Eighteenth-Century China: A View from the Book Trade,” *Canadian Journal of History* 23, no. 2 (1988), 181. Accessed October 2, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjh.23.2.177>.

<sup>262</sup> Timothy Brook, “Censorship in Eighteenth-Century China: A View from the Book Trade,” 182.

<sup>263</sup> Choe Yongcheol (최용철), “[Ming-Qing Period Forbidden Novels and Double Standard by which Literati Judged Novels] 明清時代の禁書小説과 文人의 二重의 小説觀,” *중국어문논총*, no. 31, 2006, 281. Accessed October 1, 2024. [https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/landing/article.kci?arti\\_id=ART001196768](https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/landing/article.kci?arti_id=ART001196768).

<sup>264</sup> Choe Yongcheol, “Ming-Qing Period Forbidden Novels and Double Standard by which Literati Judged Novels,” 279-80.

literary activities through regulations and enforcement authority. However, this prolonged control also reflected the unrestrained nature of popular sentiment. Literary works serve as a medium through which writers convey their emotions. When a particular genre of literature persists despite governmental efforts to suppress it through official regulations, this persistence reflects the profound significance of emotional and even erotic expression—one that, for the individual, surpasses the deterrent force of legal authority.

From the perspective of moral values, there appears to be a continued adherence to the government's reverence for Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. The description of women written by women can also show that the constraints of traditional Confucian etiquette are still there. In “Shu liefu xue gu shi” (書烈婦雪姑事) [A Record of the Virtuous Woman Xue Gu] written by Xu Yezhao (1729-?), when Xue Gu faced bandits invading her boudoir, sexually assaulting her, she could use a knife to hurt herself and frighten the bandits. This is the reason why Xue Gu is labeled as chaste. However, Xue Gu's death was regarded as a shame to the family, and it was precisely because of her unsuccessful personal defense that the bandits committed sexual acts.<sup>265</sup> Protecting one's chastity may come from an instinct to avoid harm. Judging the woman's morality based on her success in guarding her chastity not only reflects society's moral standards, but also highlights the basis of women's discussion under this moral system: abiding by the rules of chastity. Based on the sublimity of female

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<sup>265</sup> The story of the virtuous woman, Xue Gu (雪姑), is found in “Shu liefu xue gu shi” (書烈婦雪姑事) [A Record of the Virtuous Woman Xue Gu] from *Zhisizhai xuewengao* (職思齋學文稿) [*Collected Manuscripts from Zhisizi Studio*]. The central theme of the story describes how Xue Gu was shamed by her relatives, who considered her dishonored after being violated by bandits, despite her inability to protect her chastity. The author, Xu Yezhao, expresses indignation on Xue Gu's behalf, using this narrative to recount her failed resistance against the invaders in an attempt to shift the perspective. The excerpt reads: “Xue Gu, the wife of a certain villager, lived during the late Ming period when bandits were rampant. One bandit entered Xue's room, and she was unable to escape. She took a blade and attempted to stab herself, staining the bandit's clothing with her blood. However, the blade was taken away before she could die, and she was ultimately defiled. Spotting a blade nearby, she suddenly seized it and struck the bandit, wounding his thigh. The bandit, enraged, stripped her of her clothes and pierced her body with the blade, causing her to die from the wound.” Yezhao Xu, “Shu Lie Fu Xue Gu Shi” (書烈婦雪姑事) [A Record of the Virtuous Woman Xue Gu], *Zhisizhai xuewengao* (職思齋學文稿) [*Collected Manuscripts from Zhisizi Studio*]: 1juan (1794 Qing Dynasty, 清乾隆甲寅年(1794)年刻本), 1.32a-1.33b. <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/results-work.php?workID=124&language=ch>

morality, we discuss a woman's moral status. In the 18th century, such moral discussions still influenced social views and public opinion.

### 3.2. *The Breakthroughs of Eros Theory*

As mentioned in the previous chapters, Confucianism emphasizes personal morality and moral integrity, including female chastity. Such gender norms may seem strict, but in the Tang and Song dynasties, there were phenomena and remarks such as the remarriage of princesses, and the remarriage of widows was not completely denied, reflecting the looseness and flexibility of the framework. However, in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the “reward system” of the 貞節牌坊 (chastity arch) made gender norms more stringent.<sup>266</sup> In fact, the adjustment of gender norms is a long-term development, and using dynasties as periodization will inevitably be biased. Just like the gender spatial distinction of “men lead outside, women lead inside,” it was first made by Confucianism, and then the development and influence of Song Dynasty, gradually increased the regulatory rigor of this type of division.<sup>267</sup> Xu Yezhao's perspective cannot represent all women of the same era, nor can it encapsulate the general social viewpoint. The continuity of moral perspectives remains a genuine reality.

The phenomenon of *yanqing* creation during the Qing dynasty appears to exhibit a disjunction. While the government called upon the moral doctrines of Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism, it simultaneously attempted to control the uncontrollable creative and publishing activities through legal authority. Although it may seem that people are constrained by traditional ethical and moral views, one must ask whether this limitation applies only to a minority. Alternatively, should it be interpreted as an even deeper entrapment of women by moral standards? Such questions warrant further exploration.

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<sup>266</sup> Masako Kohama, *Gender History in China*, 16.

<sup>267</sup> Masako Kohama, *Gender History in China*, 17.

## **Chapter 4: Between the Writers: The Background Research and Interaction of Erotic Literature Writers**

### *1. Women Writers' Identity: Literate Women and Courtesans*

There are many female writers involved in the creation of erotic literature. It is worth discussing how, under the traditional concept of “A woman without talent is virtuous,” these female writers gradually improved their creative skills and established their personal style through literacy and education. Identity and family background are important factors that influence an individual's pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, if we roughly divide them based on their status and class, these female writers can be divided into literate women from scholar-bureaucrat families and lower-class courtesans working in the brothel industry. However, some courtesans actually came from influential families and were only affected by the war. For different reasons, including family members being convicted and implicated, they traded their talents and knowledge in brothels in order to survive. Such exceptional cases will also be explained in detail in the following paragraphs. The focus of this chapter is not only exploration of the background factors for women of different identities to participate in literary creation it seeks to understand the creative motivations and content of these female writers' erotic creations and even what characteristics or differences they have compared with similar works by men.

#### *1.1. Family Education and Growth Background*

Traditionally, education was a privilege, and before the advent of widespread printing, knowledge was transmitted orally, allowing only a select few to receive an education. The development of printing technology during the Song dynasty facilitated the mass circulation

of printed books, thus enabling everyone to enjoy the right to read.<sup>268</sup> Although the proliferation of written materials does not equate to reading ability, it at least lowered the barriers to acquiring knowledge. For example, early forms of education, such as private schools or tutoring, served as the initial means or venues for learning. By the Song dynasty, clan schools, organized by families sharing a common surname, emerged as educational institutions aimed at maintaining political power through civil service. However, these educational opportunities were predominantly accessible to males. The economic recovery that began in the 16th century gave female writers in the Jiangnan region, where the economy was booming at the end of the 16th century, more opportunities for education and even participation in literary activities based on increased private wealth.<sup>269</sup> Therefore, the substantial production of women's works is correlated with the increased accessibility of knowledge and education. Notably, there are several examples of collaborative writing among mothers and daughters within families. Among these women, many have authored poetry and prose related to *yanqing*.

The scarcity of educational opportunities for women and the discrimination they faced persisted during the Ming dynasty. For instance, the renowned female writer Gu Ruopu (1592-1681) was among the very few literate women in her family who could read and write:

Since the time of my ancestors, there have been generations devoted to the art of poetry. In ancient times, many families gained renown through the rigorous exams of the imperial court, yet the legacy of literary talent passed down from father to son, from grandfather to grandson, remains a rare gem. Particularly for daughters, like the noble lady from the esteemed lineage, the path is fraught with challenges. Many who lack talent cannot decipher their father's writings, while my sister, entwined in her

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<sup>268</sup> Wu Gang, "Selection and Distribution: a Sociological Analysis of the History of Chinese Education and Knowledge," in Ding Gang, ed, *Selected Essays on China's Education: Research and Review, Volume 2 : A History and Current Reality* (Leiden: BRILL, 2019), 100. <https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.1163/9789004409767>.

<sup>269</sup> W. L. (Wilt L.) Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 348.

own emotions, blooms with creativity, uniquely mastering the craft of such poignant verse.<sup>270</sup>

Few are the women who can weave verses into poetry, yet my sister delights in the chronicles of old. From the works of Ban Gu (班固) to Ma Rong (馬融), she traverses the depths of history, skillfully articulating and reflecting upon their essence. Her talents extend beyond the realms of five- and seven-character lines; she possesses a profound understanding of the past, bringing the stories of yore to life with clarity and grace.<sup>271</sup>

The inscription written by Gu Ruopu's brother for her collection *Woyue Xuan Gao* clearly emphasizes the rarity of women who possess poetic and literary talent. Even in an era marked by the proliferation of printing and economic prosperity, the notion that “女子無才便是德” (a woman's lack of talent is a virtue) continues to cast a heavy net over many women. Fortunately, despite their environment, there are still women like Gu Ruopu who emerge as prominent figures in literary creation.

Outside of the individual example, in the late Ming Dynasty, it was common for mothers and daughters to collaborate in publishing literary works. An example of this is Shen Yixiu (1590-1635) and her three daughters: Ye Wanwan, Ye Xiaowan, and Ye Xiaoluan. Shen Yixiu and her daughters actively engaged in poetry, similar to the women of the Xie family, led by Xie Daoyun, in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. Additionally, they exchanged insights on writing techniques with female relatives, leading to a notable phenomenon of “gifts of red brushes” being exchanged among them.<sup>272</sup> After the deaths of Ye Wanwan and Ye Xiaoluan, Shen Yixiu's husband, Ye Shaoyuan, compiled and annotated the poems of his wife and daughters, publishing them posthumously under the title *Wumengtangji* [*Noon Dream Hall Collection*].<sup>273</sup> As analyzed in the content of poetry and prose in “Chapter III.1”,

<sup>270</sup> Gu Ruoqun (顧若群), “Woyuxuan ti ci (臥月軒稿題詞) [Preface to the Manuscripts of the Reclining Moon Pavilion],” *Woyuxuan gao* (臥月軒稿) [*Collected Writings from the Reclining Moon Pavilion*] in *Wu elin wang zhe yi zhu qianbian* (Jiahuitang Ding Shi Edition, between 1875-1900), 題詞.1a. Accessed August 11, 2024.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> W. L. Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 384-5.

<sup>273</sup> W. L. Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 390.

Shen and Ye Wanwan have created *yanqing* works centered on the theme of female servants, portraying women's images. The development of their writing abilities and backgrounds is largely related to the cultural capital of the Ye family. This cultural capital reflects the social climate of female literary exchange and the increased accessibility of women's education. With such cultural capital, the women of this family were better equipped to acquire cultural knowledge, ultimately forming a literary circle with other female authors of similar backgrounds, facilitating mutual exchanges.

The story of literary family education spanning three generations or even longer is about Zhang family. By Zhang Shulian (張淑蓮)'s writings,<sup>274</sup> who wrote “孫女輩學詩書示三首” [Three Poems Learned by the Granddaughters], uses these poems to impart her family's literary education experience, as well as related reminders and expectations to her granddaughters. About education:

(My father) believed I possessed sufficient intelligence and therefore educated me in the same manner as he did my brothers. My siblings and I frequently engaged in singing poems to one another, using this activity as a form of entertainment and enjoyment in our daily lives.<sup>275</sup>

Zhang's father educated her and her siblings equally, encouraging them to play and interact through the recitation of poems. This practice reflects several points: the cultural and educational capital of the Zhang family was determined by the male elders and typically prioritized male children; however, women were not entirely excluded from this process.

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<sup>274</sup> Zhang Shulian, a woman active during the Qianlong and Daoguang eras of the Qing Dynasty, was known by her courtesy name, Pinxiang (品香), and hailed from Shangyu (present-day Shangyu, Zhejiang). Related Materials: She authored *Chenghui Pavilion Poetry Drafts* (澄輝閣吟草) [*Chenghui Pavilion Poetry Drafts*] and is included in *Liangzhe yuxuan xulu* (兩浙輞軒續錄) [*Continued Records of the Yuxuan Pavilion in Liangzhe*], *Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji* (國朝閩秀正始集) [*The Anthology of Distinguished Ladies from the Early Period of the Current Dynasty*], and *Xiaodaixuan lunshi* (小黛軒論詩) [*Xiaodaixuan Poetry Criticism*].

<https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/details-poet.php?poetID=1745&showbio=1&showanth=1&showshihuaon=1&language=eng>

<sup>275</sup> Zhang Shulian, “Sunnu bei xue shishu shi san shou (孫女輩學詩書示三首) [Three Poems Learned by the Granddaughters]”, *Zhang shulian wengao* (張淑蓮文稿) [*The Manuscripts of Zhang Shulian*]: 1 juan (Qing Dynasty), 2b. <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/details-work.php?workID=232&language=eng>

Furthermore, the acquisition of cultural capital enabled the children to participate in literary activities together, using them as a source of enjoyment and social interaction.

Regarding the effectiveness of studying literature, Zhang inherited traditional thinking and advocated: “Speeches should be both realistic and meaningful, with their value rooted in virtue. Adhering to ancient principles and laws should be a key criterion.”<sup>276</sup> The concept of boudoir education emerged with a focus on two main aspects: *the dissemination of noble ideas* (立言) and adherence to moral principles. Proper moral conduct and refined diction require careful consideration and repetition. The truthfulness of speech and the virtues of etiquette form the foundation of education.<sup>277</sup> Zhang’s perspective reflects a deep appreciation for traditional etiquette and underscores the traditional view of talented women as dignified, elegant, and literarily accomplished. This viewpoint is further supported by statements such as “loyalty and filial piety have a foundation and are adorned with the light of scriptures” (忠孝有根底，飾以經籍光)<sup>278</sup> and “ensure that talent and virtue complement rather than hinder each other (務使才與德，相成毋相妨).”<sup>279</sup> Zhang’s perspective is rooted in traditional views of virtue but also reflects the framework of the “family-social system” in traditional Chinese society, which emphasizes the care and education of future generations. Notably, Zhang’s view is encapsulated in the sentiment, “Although you are not a man, I hope you will earn a good reputation” (汝雖非男兒，期於名姓揚),<sup>280</sup> highlighting the importance of spreading noble ideas. Zhang did not expect her descendants to adhere strictly to the traditional belief that “a woman’s lack of talent is a virtue.” Instead, she envisioned

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<sup>276</sup> Zhang Shulian, “Three Poems Learned by the Granddaughters”, 3a.

<sup>277</sup> The original text of “Three Poems Learned by the Granddaughters” is as follows: “Not merely is your character pure, but also your words possess a rare allure. I urge you to ponder, reflect, and seek, to savor the depths where true meanings speak. The ribbons you wear reflect your grace, while opulent adornments enhance your place. The jade you don lends elegance to your stride, and hoop earrings beautify as they glide. In writing, cherish the virtue within, as you study the ancients, let focus begin. In sorrow or joy, maintain your calm light, and impart such wisdom within your home’s sight. Ibid, 3a.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid, 3a.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid, 3b.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid, 3a.

them making significant contributions to the world through literature. This approach can be attributed to the profound impact of her personal family education and aligns with the evolving trend in the Qing Dynasty, where female writers emerged from the background to gain attention and acclaim for their literary talents, much like their male counterparts.

Courtesans, after entered a marital relationship and became concubines, learned writing and writing, probably from their husbands. Take Wan Xiuwei as an example:

When Wan married me, she was barely sixteen. She could read and her calligraphy in the small regular style was accomplished. (.....) When I taught her poetry, I began with the three hundred pieces [of the Book of Odes], and only when that subject had been fully mastered did I follow the historical development [of poetry] until we came to the literary writing of today.<sup>281</sup>

Her husband Mao Yuanyi (1594–1640), noted that he taught Wan how to write poetry. This reflects not only the possibility of scholarly and courtesan relationships in that era but also highlights how courtesans could begin to engage in literary creation through their husbands' guidance.

Liu Rushi (柳如是, 1618-1664) represents another case:

A disciple of Xu Fo, her surname is Yang, and her name is Ai, styled Liuqi. She carries herself with a graceful elegance, as light and ethereal as a startled swan. Possessing a sharp and agile mind, her poetry shines with exceptional talent, particularly in the realm of regulated verse. Her calligraphy bears the refined style of Yu Shinan (虞世南, 558-638) and Chu Suiliang (褚遂良, 579-658). In her early twenties, she returned to Yu Mountain, at a time when the names of Qian Zongbo (Qian Qianyi) and He Dongjun began to gain prominence.<sup>282</sup>

As a renowned courtesan from Wujiang, Liu first honed her skills by learning from the fellow courtesan Xu Fo (徐佛), which included the ability to compose poetry aimed at literati clientele. After meeting Qian Qianyi (錢謙益, 1582-1664), she became his concubine, which

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<sup>281</sup> English translation from: W. L. Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 371.

<sup>282</sup> Xu Naichang, “柳是略傳,” *Guixiu cichao*, fasc. 25, 9.4b. Accessed August 20, 2024.

further amplified Liu's reputation. While male literati may have provided a source of literary exchange for Liu, it is perhaps Qian's literary engagement that contributed to the advancement of her works; however, the primary function of this association was to enhance her literary notoriety. In this context, it is not cultural capital that is leveraged, but rather Qian's social network capital.

Yuan Mei (1716-1798), a renowned writer of the mid-Qing Dynasty, is celebrated not only for his literary talent in poetry but also for his significant role in encouraging women's participation in literary creation. In his article “先妣章太孺人行狀” [The Behavior of the Concubine Zhang Tairu],<sup>283</sup> Yuan Mei expresses deep respect for the upbringing of female elders in the family. This respect likely contributed to his supportive stance on women's studies and his encouragement of literary creation among the three sisters of the Yuan family—Yuan Ji, Yuan Zhu, and Yuan Tang.<sup>284</sup> Among his numerous female students, the women of the Yuan family were not overlooked. In this regard, the Yuan family serves as an example of how women in the Qing Dynasty gained access to the keys of literary creation through family education.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the writing environment was encouraging to women, spanning from literacy and reading to the creative stage. Women had access to family education that enriched their cultural capital, participated in an editorial atmosphere conducive to their works, and engaged in diverse interactions with other writers. Even courtesans, through their associations with male literati, found opportunities to enter the

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<sup>283</sup> Yuan Mei (袁枚), “Xianbi zhang tairu ren xing zhuang (先妣章太孺人行狀) [The Behavior of the Concubine Zhang Tairu],” *Xiaocang shan fang wenji* (小倉山房文集) [Collected Works of Xiaocang Shan Fang]: Juan 27 (Shanghai: Zhonghua Publishing, 1920), 20-22.

<sup>284</sup> Lee Teweï, “論袁枚《隨園女弟子詩選》呈現之詩學觀及其在清代文學史上之意義 [Discussion on the Poetic Viewpoints Presented by Mei Yuan's *Selected Poems by the Female Disciples of Suiyuan* and Its Significance on Ching Dynasty Literature History],” *Dong Hwa Journal of Chinese Studies*, no. 10 (2009): 192. doi:10.6999/DHJCS.200912.0187.

realm of literary creation. Once involved in creative work, choosing themes—particularly erotic ones—posed a significant challenge given the social climate of the time. As discussed in “Chapter III.2: Renaissance: Late Ming Period” and “Chapter 3.3: Challenges and Breakthroughs: Until the Mid-Qing Dynasty (Yong-Qian Period),” the development of erotic literature in the Ming and Qing Dynasties experienced growth but also faced intense scrutiny from both the government and public opinion. However, regarding the lyrical nature of *yanqing* literature and the literary tradition of the “fragrant herb beauty” theme, it is not difficult to understand why women engage in the writing of *yanqing* literature.

### 1.2. Motivation for Erotic Literature Writings

The collection of poems about ladies expresses the aspirations and expectations of women’s participation in literary creation, which is a form of autobiography and self-expression. However, there are also situations of self-concealment and censorship. The self-censorship part is reflected in examining the “erotic” elements in the works - these explicit contents that are not universally accepted.<sup>285</sup>

In addition to explicitly using eroticism to express longing, there are also subtle works of eroticism as a form of lyricism, which are more commonly found in the writings of gentry women. These works, often focusing on poetry or paintings that depict female figures, typically use erotic imagery as a means of expressing emotions rather than desire. When examining the prefaces written for female authors whose collections contain occasional erotic poems, terms such as “詩教” (poetic education), “雅” (elegance), and “溫婉” (gentleness) are frequently used to praise their works. Therefore, when analyzing the motivations behind this type of erotic literature, it is more appropriate to classify them under “lyrical expression of

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<sup>285</sup> Yang Binbin, “[The “Self’s” Dilemma: Illness and Autobiographical Desire in the Poetry Collection of a Qing-Dynasty Woman Poet] 「自我」的困境——一部清代閩秀詩集中的疾病呈現與自傳欲望,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy* 37, (2010): 97-8. (95-130) 2024年1月3日.  
doi:10.6351/BICLP.201009.0095.

emotions” rather than “expression of desire” in the context of *yanqing*. In terms of literary tradition, this can be connected to the “Fragrant Grass and Beauty” tradition.

In terms of the definition of *yan* poetry, the traditional Chinese understanding has been quite broad. Topics such as love, boudoir laments, the depiction of objects and landscapes infused with a sense of romance, and allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty” can all be classified under the category of *yanqing* poetry.<sup>286</sup> Based on these four definitions, the love category refers to writings or songs that depict the love between spouses or lovers. The boudoir lament category records a woman’s longing for her lover while confined to the inner chambers. The category of love-themed object or scenery description involves writing or singing about objects or scenes associated with a lover from a *yanqing* perspective. The first three themes can be intuitively understood as expressions of emotions between men and women. However, what does “the Fragrant Grass and Beauty” entail? This writing tradition originated in the State of Chu during the Spring and Autumn period, particularly in the works of the renowned poet Qu Yuan (屈原, 339BC-278BC), such as *Lisao* (離騷) [Encountering Sorrow] and *Jiuge* (九歌) [Nine Songs].

The formation of the fragrant grass imagery in the Chu State is linked not only to the geographical environment of the southern wetlands but also to the context of rituals. Additionally, fragrant grass carries connotations of witchcraft, which relates to the seductive powers of beauty and magic found in terms like “magic” and “charm” in English.<sup>287</sup> As for the term “beauty,” in pre-Qin texts, it referred to individuals of moral integrity, specifically sages or virtuous people. Qu Yuan not only retained this meaning but also employed “beauty” in his works to symbolize enlightened rulers, expressing his political ideals.

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<sup>286</sup> Yu Yuting, 香草美人的召喚：臺灣香奩體的風雅話語與詩歌美學 (1816-1945) [*The Call of Beauty and Fragrant Grass: The Elegant Discourse and Poetic Aesthetics of Taiwan’s Xianglian Poetry (1816–1945)*] (Taipei: Chengchi University Press, 2022), 3.

<sup>287</sup> Kang Zhengguo, *Revisiting the Wind and Moon: Sex and Classical Chinese Literature*, 66.

Furthermore, he used the concept of beauty to represent youth, conveying his anxieties over the passage of time and extending this theme to reflect the concerns surrounding women's marriages.<sup>288</sup> Thus, it can also be said that this is a form of depicting beauties to capture and record the imagery of youth represented by them. The romantic connotations inherent in "the Fragrant Grass and Beauty" primarily revolve around the emotional dynamics between men and women, often focusing on female protagonists. The descriptions encompass not only outward appearances but also delve into inner emotional experiences. By examining the works of female *yanqing* poetry from the late Ming to the mid-Qing Dynasty within this literary tradition, one can gain insight into their creative motivations and the historical connections between the two.

According to the works discussed in this paper, some of them conform to more than one definition,<sup>289</sup> as their content may include elements of representing boudoir lament while simultaneously using the image of a beauty to symbolize youth and the feminine ideal. Alternatively, they might depict love stories between men and women while conveying emotions through symbolic objects. If we categorize the differences in the works by distinguishing between the identities of courtesans and gentry women, we find that the writings of Ming courtesans such as Bai Huan, Jing Pianpian, Liang Yuji, Shang Zilan, Wang Wei, Wang Yuzhen, and Zhao Yanru are mostly love-themed, centered on their romantic relationships and the longing for their lovers. In contrast, gentry women's works are primarily focused on object-oriented love poetry and the Fragrant Grass and Beauty style. This may be due to the influence of traditional poetic teachings, which limited gentry women's ability to express romantic feelings as directly as courtesans did. Instead, gentry

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<sup>288</sup> Kang Zhengguo, *Revisiting the Wind and Moon: Sex and Classical Chinese Literature*, 72.

<sup>289</sup> Due to the scarcity of female authors who explicitly articulate their motivations for writing *yanqing* works, Chapter III.1 categorizes the discussed *yan* writings according to the four aforementioned definitions. Please refer to the appendix for the compiled table, which categorizes 39 poems and *ci* compositions by 28 female writers.

women often resorted to singing about objects to express their imagination or longing for love, or to using the Fragrant Grass and Beauty style as a form of symbolic representation. However, another possibility is that the literary collections of gentry women underwent curation by male literati friends or relatives, who filtered the content based on literary standards of refinement. This phenomenon is often reflected in the prefaces to their collections, where the positioning of the works and the literary evaluations of the female authors can be discerned. This topic will be further discussed in “Chapter 5.2, Exemplification: Chinese Literary Criticism Theory.”

## *2. The Interaction Between Men and Women Writers*

After the Wanli era of the Ming Dynasty, courtesans began to transform into “literati.” In addition to the customs of interaction between scholars and courtesans since the Tang and Song dynasties, the prevailing trend among Ming officials to consort with prostitutes became a phenomenon that facilitated the development of courtesans who displayed their literary talents to attract patrons.<sup>290</sup> Many courtesans showcased their literary talents through creative writing to attract clientele from the scholar class. At this time, literature served as a means for courtesans to attract patrons. While this transformation might seem contrary to the romantic and introspective nature of literary expression, it was precisely this trend that facilitated the expansion of the literary world within the brothel industry. This development significantly contributed to the growth of women’s literature and the emergence of erotic literature authored by women.

### *2.1. Writers’ Association*

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<sup>290</sup> Wang Hongtai, “Famous prostitutes and artistic life in brothels - prostitutes and literati during the Ming and Qing Dynasties,” 83-7.

The network of connections among writers, and the formation of factions based on literary theories, represent significant aspects of Chinese writers' organizations. Throughout Chinese history, diverse factions and groups of writers have been common. In particular, the presence of many writers in official positions meant that political opposition had a notable impact on the differentiation of literary factions.

As far as the Ming Dynasty is concerned, from the prevalence of the classical style of *Qizi* (七子) [seven masters] and *Taige ti* (臺閣體) [Taige style of writing] in the early Ming Dynasty, to the appeal of the 唐宋派 [*Tang and Song Dynasty schools*] to the spirit of ancient Chinese literature in the Tang and Song Dynasties, to the pursuit of “Bold Expression of One’s True Self” (獨紓性靈，不拘格套) at the end of the Ming Dynasty, it is unique and unconventional. The 公安派 [*Gongan School*] and 竟陵派 [*Jingling School*]; the literature of the Ming Dynasty moved from retro prose to the new form, 小品文 [*Skit Literary*]. In terms of regional development, the Wu region has long been a thriving center of literary activity. Beginning as early as the Western Jin dynasty with figures such as Lu Ji (陸機, 261-303) and Lu Yun (陸雲, 262-303), and continuing through the early Ming period with the formation of poetic schools by the “北郭十子” [Ten Disciples of Beiguo] and the “吳中四傑” [Four Masters of Wu], the literary style of the Wu region was largely established. During the mid-to-late Ming period, prominent leaders of the literary movements, including the “前後七子” [Former and Later Seven Masters] and the Tang-Song School, such as Xu Zhenqing (徐禎卿, 1479-1511), Wang Shizhen (王世貞, 1526-1590), and Gui Youguang (歸有光, 1506-1571), also hailed from this region.<sup>291</sup> As for the Jingchu region, where literary development was relatively late, it became the birthplace of the Gongan School, led by the Three Yuan

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<sup>291</sup> Li Yushuan (李玉栓), “[The Role of Scholars’ Association in Regional Literatures in the Ming Dynasty—Taking Jin’an, Wuzhong and Jingchu as Examples] 明代文人结社与地域文学的发展——以晋安、吴中、荆楚为例,” *Advances in Social Sciences* (社会科学前沿), 2020, 9 (9), 1390-1.

brothers. Prominent late Ming and early Qing scholars such as Huang Zongxi (黃宗羲), Gu Yanwu (顧炎武, 1613-1682), and Wang Fuzhi (王夫之, 1619-1692) were key figures in shaping Qing dynasty prose. They emphasized the educational function of literature and its practical application to life, opposing the prevalent Ming-era trend of imitating ancient literary styles.<sup>292</sup> During the Kangxi to Qianlong periods of the Qing dynasty, the 桐城派 [Tongcheng School] emerged as the literary authority. Scholars like Fang Bao (方苞, 1668-1749) and Yao Nai (姚鼐, 1731-1815) advocated for a revival of classical prose and promoted the retrogressive style of the Cheng-Zhu School of Neo-Confucianism. They argued that literature, especially prose, should aim to integrate the feudal orthodoxy with literary tradition.<sup>293</sup> The Tongcheng School was named after the Tongcheng region, Anhui Province, as its members shared similar literary principles and origins. These literary factions not only reflected the groupings among literati but also played a crucial role in circulating their literary theories and works through these networks.

Korean literature was disseminated to China through the communication networks among literati, and similarly, Chinese women's works circulated via these networks. For instance, Qiu Tan (丘坦), during the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty, maintained a close relationship with the Yuan brothers, key figures of the Gongan School in the Jingchu area.<sup>294</sup> Stationed as a guarding general in the Liaodong region for many years, Qiu Tan authored *Duliao ji* (度遼集) [*Collection of Pacifying the Liao*].<sup>295</sup> During his service as North Korea's

<sup>292</sup> Liu Dajie (劉大杰), 中國文學發展史 下 (*History of the Development of Chinese Literature Vol. 2*) (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, January 2006), 240-1.

<sup>293</sup> Liu Dajie, *Zhongguo Wenxue Fazhanshi Vol. 2*, 244-6.

<sup>294</sup> Yuan Zhongdao (袁中道) “traveled to Wuchang, where he enjoyed literary and convivial gatherings with Qiu Changru of Xiling and Pan Gengsheng of Dazhang.” (游武昌，與西陵丘長孺、大鄣潘庚生等結文酒之歡) Yushuan Li, “The Role of Scholars' Association in Regional Literatures in the Ming Dynasty—Taking Jin'an, Wuzhong and Jingchu as Examples,” *Advances in Social Sciences*, 2020, 9 (9), 1392.

<sup>295</sup> An Nami (안나미), “[Heo Gyun's Patterns of Literature Exchange between Korea and China: Focusing on Late Ming Dynasty Woo Soonhee (虞淳熙)] 허균(許筠)과 한중문학교류-만명(晩明)시기 우순희(虞淳熙)를 중심으로-,” *Korean Classical Research Society* (한국고전연구학회) 50 (2020), 89-90.

envoy, known as 천추사/千秋使 [Qianqiu Envoy], he met and corresponded with the Korean writer Heo Gyun (허균/許筠). Concurrently, Heo Gyun also engaged with other Ming Dynasty literati, including Ju Jibeon (주지번) and Go Cheonjun (고천준).<sup>296</sup>

Returning from the broader transnational connections of the literati network to the interaction between Chinese male and female writers, Qiu Tan's relationship with Bai Huan, a courtesan, appears closely linked to brothel consumption. Bai Huan's literary works reflect her deep affection for Qiu Tan. For instance, in the poem "Replying to Qiu Changru" and in "Sending a Reply to Qiu Lang", written on her deathbed, she recounts her experiences of being lost in the *Jiaofang* (教坊) [brothel] and expresses her sorrow at departing before Qiu Tan.<sup>297</sup>

Bai Huan was initially left to grow up in a brothel, where she learned to read and compose poetry. It was through her literary talent that she met and eventually fell in love with Qiu Tan. Her life experience, shaped by the brothel's service-oriented education, exposed her to both music and literature. The preservation of her works today is not only due to her status as a renowned courtesan in Nanjing but also,<sup>298</sup> to some extent, because of the recognition she gained through her association with Qiu Tan.

From learning to read and write, to engaging in literary creation, and even interacting with other literati through their works, achieving positive recognition was a significant challenge for women of the inner chambers in traditional China, whose lives were constrained by the limitations of the domestic sphere: "not leaving the inner gate, nor stepping outside the second door." (大門不出，二門不邁) How, then, could women writers

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<sup>296</sup> An Nami, "Heo Gyun's Patterns of Literature Exchange between Korea and China: Focusing on Late Ming Dynasty Woo Soonhee," 88 & 91. The correspondence between Xu Yun and Qiu Tan can be gleaned from the records in the *Yibing Chaotian Lu* (乙丙朝天錄) [Yibing Imperial Court Records], which document their banquets and gatherings.

<sup>297</sup> For a detailed discussion of the same poem, please refer to note 163.

<sup>298</sup> Wang Duanshiu (王端淑), "Bai Huan liue zhuan," *Minyuan shiwei chu bian* (名媛詩緯初編) [*Poetic Textures of Eminent Women: First Compilation*] (Qing yin tang (清音堂), 1667), fasc. 10, 25.18b.

ensure the circulation and preservation of their works given their status as gentry women (閨秀)?

Conditions for spreading the works of gentry women: First, as the daughter of a famous father, she has shown excellent talents when she was young and received a well family education. Her father and elder brothers are not stingy in supporting her, so it will be easy for this lady to achieve fame. Secondly, as the wife of a famous scholar, if the husband and wife get along harmoniously, write and share poems to each other, and have the husband to help improve the works, then the reputation of the lady will naturally increase easily. Third, as a mother of a talented son, in addition to being respected by the peers and praised by her children, her reputation will naturally spread widely.<sup>299</sup>

Conditions for a lady to achieve fame: The reasons a lady can gain fame are the support of relatives, teachers, and friends. The enduring reputation of boudoir poetry is often due to the promotion by prominent figures.<sup>300</sup>

Analyzing the conditions for the circulation of women's works from the perspective of male literati inevitably places women in a passive role, dependent on male assistance. Whether through fathers, brothers, sons, or mentors, all these figures were invariably male. This reflects the challenges and dilemmas women faced in the literary world: how to gain prominence in a male-dominated field. In the absence of modern platforms, such as social media, to publish their works, positioning female writers as dependents of men was not necessarily an act of discrimination or prejudice.

By participating in male literary networks, one can further discuss the conditions for the dissemination of their works. It can be argued that these networks were a beneficial means for works to circulate. Women might have joined these networks for this very reason, or it could be that by entering such networks, their works gained wider recognition. In other

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<sup>299</sup> Xi Yuqing (洗玉清), 廣東女子藝文考 (*A Survey of Guangdong Women's Arts and Literature*) (Changsha: The Commercial Press, 1941), 後序 1.

<sup>300</sup> Ren Zhaolin (任兆麟), “愛蘭詩鈔 [Collected Poems of Ailan],” *Wuzhong nushi shichao* (吳中女士詩鈔) [*Collected Poems of the Lady of Wu Zhong*] (1789), 18a. Accessed September 3, 2024.

words, the “literary network” was both the cause and effect of the circulation of women’s works.

Relying on close familial ties, especially male relatives, was often the most common means for women to gain access to literary opportunities. In many cases, families became units where female literary talent was nurtured, resulting in the emergence of a distinct family-based literary culture among Qing Dynasty women:

In the Qing Dynasty, there were many outstanding gentry women, such as the Seventh Women of Jiaoyuan (The Banana Garden Poetry Club), the Tenth Women of Wuzhong, and the Female Disciple of Suiyuan, etc., who are still well known to everyone today.<sup>301</sup>

The “Seventh Women of Jiaoyuan” (The Banana Garden Poetry Club) refers to a notable Qing Dynasty women’s poetry society. Its famous members include Lin Yining (林以寧), Gu Qiji (顧啓姬), Chai Jixian (柴季嫻), Feng Youling (馮又令), Qian Yunyi (錢雲儀), Zhang Chayun (張槎雲), and Mao Anfang (毛安芳).<sup>302</sup> Gu Ruopu and Xu Can also became members of the club later. The Banana Garden Poetry Club was primarily active in the Qiantang region (now in Zhejiang), an area rich in cultural and historical significance.

Similarly, the “Tenth Women of Wuzhong” included Zhang Zilan (張滋蘭), Zhang Fen (張芬), Lu Ying (陸瑛), Li Mei (李嫻), Xi Huiwen (席蕙文), Zhu Zongshu (朱宗淑), Jiang Zhu (江珠), Shen Xiang (沈纓), You Danxian (尤澹仙), and Shen Chiyu (沈持玉).<sup>303</sup> These women formed the Qingxi Literary Society (清溪吟社) in the Wuzhong region (present-day Suzhou, Jiangsu Province). The phrase, “Qingxi female historians received family instruction and were skilled in poetry and rituals,” (清溪女史幼稟家訓，嫺禮習

<sup>301</sup> The citation is from: Hu Wenkai (胡文楷), 歷代婦女著作考 (*A Study on Women’s Writings in Successive Dynasties*) (Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House (上海古籍出版社), 1985), 927.

<sup>302</sup> Wang Yunzhang (王蘊章), “Qiantang jiaoyuan qizi (錢塘蕉園七子) [The Seven Masters of the Banana Garden in Qiantang],” *Ranzhi yu yun* (然脂餘韻) [*Lingering Charm of Refined Fragrance*]: 6 juan (1920), fasc. 3, 卷六 17a. Accessed September 3, 2024.

<sup>303</sup> Ren Zhaolin, “吳中女士詩詞 [Poetry by Women from the Wu Region],” *Wuzhong nushi shichao*, 姓氏. 1a-b. Accessed September 3, 2024.

詩)<sup>304</sup> highlights how, for example, Zhang Zilan benefitted from her family education, learning to read and write, and later joining a literary group with other women in the region. The “Female Disciples of Suiyuan” refers to the women led by Yuan Mei, who served as their mentor. Despite deeply entrenched traditional social constraints, the formation of these women’s poetry societies, and the gathering of female students around male mentors like Yuan, signifies the undeniable growth of female literary communities during this period.

Compared to male relatives, the assistance from teachers appears particularly significant. A notable example is the famous Qing Dynasty scholar Yuan Mei, whose interactions with numerous female disciples led to the formation of the renowned group known as the “Female Disciples of Suiyuan.” This was a phenomenon that remained relatively rare at the time:

Mr. Yuan Mei, who was nearing eighty or ninety years old, was highly respected by younger generations. He summoned his grandchildren, and all the women in the clan revered him. The ladies in the boudoir also knew of this elder and greatly admired Yuan’s literary talent. When Yuan appeared in a dignified manner, women seeking advice would gather around him in admiration. If they had not yet met, a lady seeking guidance would first send a letter and a thousand-word manuscript to Yuan; alternatively, she might have a brief conversation with him and then present her carefully prepared work, hoping for his suggestions. Following their discussions, she would promptly revise her work according to Yuan's feedback, or she might create a portrait of him and venerate it with incense daily. Even if Yuan assisted by changing just a single word, the lady would offer him profound respect and worship.<sup>305</sup>

Many women sought to become disciples of Yuan Mei, often sending their writings to him for guidance, to which Yuan Mei generously responded with letters offering assistance to refine their work. However, despite the widespread acclaim for Yuan Mei's poetry, his

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<sup>304</sup> Ren Zhaolin, “Qingxi shi gao xu (清溪詩藁敘) [Preface to the Qingxi Poetry Manuscripts],” *Wuzhong nushi shichao*, 1a.

<sup>305</sup> Wu Xici (吳錫麒), “Suiyuan qianbei bashi shou yan (隨園前輩八十壽言) [The 80th Birthday Speech of Mr. Suiyuan],” *Suiyuan quanji: Suiyuan bashi shou yan (隨園全集: 隨園八十壽言)* [*Suiyuan Complete Works: Suiyuan's 80th Birthday Message*] (Xinjing: The Commercial Press, 1944), 6.

acceptance of female disciples was met with considerable criticism. Critics argued that such behavior reflected his “licentiousness” and tarnished the reputation of literary education.<sup>306</sup>

These critiques reveal two key phenomena: First, the societal scrutiny toward women pursuing education; and second, the enduring influence of Confucian propriety in governing interactions between men and women. It was well-established for male teachers to take on male students, but when the students were female, this rare occurrence provoked misunderstanding. The social norms dictated by Confucian propriety associated the interaction between male teachers and female students with impropriety, viewing it through the lens of potential immorality. Even though these female disciples formed a significant literary circle, the unusual nature of their relationship with Yuan Mei invited suspicion and moral judgment.

Focusing on the members of the Suiyuan female disciples, Luo Qilan (駱綺蘭) stands out as one of the representative figures. She not only embodies how a literati woman accumulates cultural capital through participation in literary organizations and schools but also demonstrates how she leveraged her network to connect with more male literati. Luo Qilan became a disciple of Yuan Mei, Wang Wenzhi (王文治, 1730-1802) and Wang Chang (王昶, 1724-1806), and accumulated rich cultural capital from them. In the more than twenty letters written by Yuan Mei to her, we can see that he introduced Luo to male authors such as Wang Tan (王曇, 1760-1817), Yi Jichang (伊繼昌, 1776-1829), Chen Yongguang (陳用光, 1768-1835), etc., and promoted their interactions. In “聽秋軒贈言” (Ting Qiuxuan’s Gifts), we can also see a large number of male writers who interacted with Luo Qilan through poems, such as Qi Feng’e (奇豐額, 1745-1806) and other Manchu writers. They were obviously connected through Yuan Mei and Wang Wenzhi. Ladies and male writers would

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<sup>306</sup> Lee Teweï, “Discussion on the Poetic Viewpoints Presented by Mei Yuan’s The Anthology of Sui Garden Female Students and Its Significance on Ching Dynasty Literature History,” 188.

interact and communicate with each other by sending poems, paintings, chants, etc., to each other. “Ting Qiuxuan’s Gifts” records that male writers include Yao Nai, etc., while female writers include Jiang Zhu (江珠, 1764-1804), Bao Zhilan (鮑之蘭, 1751-1812), Xu Dexin (許德馨, 1766-1822), etc. The literary and artistic exchanges between men and women are preserved in written form.<sup>307</sup> Whether through the accumulation of personal connections, mutual recommendations among writers, and multiple correspondences, these writers’ groups demonstrate fluid interaction.

Publishing a collection of personal works and inviting celebrities to write prefaces and postscripts will enhance the personal reputation.<sup>308</sup> In addition to publishing personal poetry collections, Luo Qilan also compiled anthologies, publishing the works of celebrities and ladies and their gifts into “聽秋軒閨中同人集” [Ting Qiuxuan’s Gifts] and “Ting Qiuxuan’s Collection of Fans in the Boudoir”, respectively.<sup>309</sup> Can women in the Qing Dynasty actively participate in the literary world? Luo Qilan serves as a positive example of such involvement. Similar to most social networks, the network of literati in the Qing Dynasty resembled a spider’s web, with male writers at its core, while allowing some women to gradually penetrate the network from the periphery. This not only enhanced the visibility of women’s works but also facilitated communication among authors, breaking the constraints and limitations imposed by gender.

In comparison, most of the women participating in these larger male-dominated social networks or literary groups were from literati families. This can be attributed to the sources of cultural capital and social capital. As members of literati families, they were more likely than

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<sup>307</sup> Zhao Houjun, “Women Writers’ Consciousness of Talent and Fame During the Qian-Jia Reigns and Cultural Transition,” *Chung Cheng Chinese Studies* 2, no. 32 (2018.12): 148-9.

<sup>308</sup> The prefaces and postscripts name as xu (序) and ba (跋) in Chinese.

<sup>309</sup> Zhao Houjun, “Women Writers’ Consciousness of Talent and Fame During the Qian-Jia Reigns and Cultural Transition,” 151-2.

courtesans to receive guidance and recommendations from educated male relatives and friends, thereby entering the mainstream literary world. In contrast, courtesans could only rely on their personal charm in the workplace to attract the attention of male literati. In terms of numbers, courtesans were at a disadvantage. Furthermore, the literary talent of courtesans often depended on chance. For instance, Bai Huan had favorable circumstances that enabled her to acquire literary knowledge, which in turn allowed her to attract male literati who could guide her into their social network.

## 2.2. *Private Correspondence*

Beyond public interactions, male and female literati often engaged in private correspondence through letters. Such private exchanges may involve mutual communication between the two individuals or unidirectional descriptions from one party. The following analysis will categorize these exchanges based on whether they are bilateral or unilateral, followed by a discussion of the relationships within each category.

Descriptions of courtesans in “*Xiaxie biji*” (a collection of writings) are often highly idealized. Male literati tend to construct an idealized portrayal of the brothel, focusing on the beauty of the courtesans, the literary mannerisms of the scholars, and the grace of the women, rather than depicting them as greedy or lacking literary talent.<sup>310</sup> When these male literati sought official positions and aspired to succeed in the imperial examination, they often faced the harsh reality of failure. Consequently, they turned their attention to the women depicted in their writings, such as courtesans, and idealized their representations, reflecting their personal aspirations for literary success and vitality. This can be seen as a projection of their own state of mind. Similarly, in *yanqing* novels, the portrayal of female characters is predominantly

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<sup>310</sup> Hu, “On the Generic Category of *Fengyue Meng*: Courtesan Novel, City Novel or Secular Nolar?” 129.

one-sided and shaped by male authors. The alluring beauty or seductive demeanor of women exists purely within the realm of male imagination.

“Incorporated into the popular almanacs, the erotic novellas and letter-writing manuals are related each other in a special way.”<sup>311</sup> From intimate expressions of sexuality to their incorporation into popular culture, the *yanqing* literature that began in the late Ming Dynasty can be considered as entering the public sphere, rather than being mere rumors circulated among the crowd. Consequently, male authors’ unidirectional portrayals of women became more widely recognized. In contrast, depictions of women by women predominantly exist within individual collections of works, serving either as personal expressions of interest or as exchanges among female friends. These works, as mentioned in “Chapter III,” include numerous poems and lyrics. Compared to male writings, they tend to be oriented towards small groups and represent implicit forms of creation; thus, their readership is not conceived as a mass audience.

The literary exchanges between women and women, or between women and men, reflect a trend of increasingly frequent interactions among writers. The editor of brothel rhymes during the Wanli period, Zhang Menghui (張夢徽), included poems that mentioned his name in the book, and the content of the poems pinned the author, Weiyang prostitute (維揚妓), her love for Zhang. The poem’s content directly expresses the woman’s deep longing and the sexual desire between them:

In the wind and rain of the Guangling region, I had not yet had the chance to tidy my clothes after our intimate encounter. We met quietly, exchanging our affection through glances. The agreed-upon date had entrusted my heart to you. . . . . This evening, our affection runs deep. The bond we have formed feels as profound as a contract spanning three lifetimes.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Richard G. Wang, “Practicing Erotic Fiction and Romanticizing Late-Ming Writing Practice.” *Ming Studies*, no. 1 (2000): 83. <https://doi.org/10.1179/014703700788763180>.

<sup>312</sup> Weiyang prostitute, “贈張夢徽 [Gifted to Zhang Menghui],” in *The Rhymes of Qinglou*, juan 1, 2.

The poem is called “Gift to Zhang Menghui.” A woman expresses her feelings so directly and never forgets the close contact between the two.

Xiang Lanzhen (項蘭貞), a female writer from the Wanli period, is notable not only for her extensive body of work but also for her interactions with other female writers. For instance, her *ci* “Queqiaoxian: Qixi yu nu guan wang xiuwei (鵲橋仙：七夕和女冠王修微)” [Qixi Festival and the Female Daoist Priestess Wang Xiuwei] serves as evidence of her engagement with Wang Wei, a prominent courtesan of the same period:

Along the path, twin stars uphold their promise of constancy. The capricious nature of parting is ever-present in our world. Amidst the tranquil beauty, only the soft cry of the magpie breaks the stillness. I long to freeze this moment, to share in the sorrows of our separation. Alone upon the steps, I sing softly, my slender figure clad in delicate attire, accompanied solely by the graceful sway of my hemline.<sup>313</sup>

Echoing each other with poems is a common interactive practice among writers in Chinese literature. This form of interaction typically involves using the same or similar rhyme schemes and word patterns. The poem in question is set against the backdrop of the *Qixi* Festival (Chinese Valentine’s Day), a significant traditional occasion for female friends to meet and gather. *Qixi* not only commemorates the romantic legend of the Cowherd (牛郎) and the 織女 (weaver girl) but also features a “begging for skill” (乞巧) ceremony, where women gather to pray for improved textile abilities. Although the poem does not explicitly mention the relationship between Xiang Lanzhen and Wang Wei, its portrayal of reunion and separation reflects the sentimental nature of women’s experiences.

Gui Maoyi and Mrs. Jiyun (吉雲) also shared a relationship characterized by mutual poetry composition and direct, face-to-face interaction. Judging by the title Gui Maoyi assigned to the poem, it is evident that:

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<sup>313</sup> Xiang Lanzhen (項蘭貞), “Queqiaoxian: Qixi yu nu guan wang xiuwei (鵲橋仙：七夕和女冠王修微)” [Qixi Festival and the Female Daoist Priestess Wang Xiuwei],” in Duanshu Wang, *Mingyuan shiwei chubian*, fasc. 11, 35.5a.

The owner of Yuchaoyuan had recently traveled to Pinghu and was suddenly reminded of a shared memory with Ms. Shen Jiyun. During the Jiaqing Ding Mao year, we had visited East Lake together in the same boat. One night, while I was deeply asleep, Jiyun suddenly recited two lines of poetry: “The brilliant stirrup candle illuminates the flower's sleep, and tonight's scene seems to ascend to heaven.” I awoke from my dreams, and Jiyun continued, “I woke from my dreams, unaware that the moon had fallen over the river, and the sound of the waves seemed to fly to my pillow.

The next morning, (.....) We then ascended Nongzhu Tower together, where the characters on the adjoining wall resonated with our poetry. At that moment, Mr. Jian Tian happened to arrive and composed a poem in response to ours.

Time has flown by, and ten years have passed. Mr. Jian Tian has since returned to Daoshan, and Jiyun has also passed away prematurely. Moved by these reflections, I still adhere to the same rhyme. Jiyun's poetry was swift and clever, surpassing mine by far. Her regular script was elegant, displaying the style of Dong Xiangguang. Though she was not yet thirty, her talent was like a fragile orchid and broken jade, truly a cause for melancholy.<sup>314</sup>

The title of this poem reflects Gui Maoyi's motivation for writing. The opportunity allowed both Gui and Mrs. Jiyun to express and share their observations and thoughts through literature while traveling. This interaction not only mirrored their friendship but also represented a mode of engagement where they respected and acknowledged each other's literary talents. As evidenced by Gui's evaluation of Mrs. Jiyun's talent at the end of the title, he considered it to surpass his own. The mutual appreciation between literati is a valuable relationship, transcending identity, and gender.

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<sup>314</sup> Gui Maoyi, “(The title of this poem corresponds to its translation in the main text. Due to its considerable length, only a note is provided here as a reference, along with the original Mandarin title.) (寓巢園主人有平湖之行，忽憶嘉慶丁卯偕海上沈吉雲女士同舟訪東湖，夜半余已熟寐，而吉雲朗吟二語云：輝煌鐙燭照花眠，今夕渾疑欲上天，余夢中驚醒續云：夢醒不知江月墮，濤聲飛到枕函邊，翊日，微雨篷窗其眺，吉雲云：辛苦篙人蓑笠肩，濛濛細雨滿江天，余又續云：與卿好比成行雁，雙宿蘆花淺水邊，于是同登弄珠樓，次壁間樓宇字韻詩，時簡田先生適至，亦有和章。冉冉已十載，先生近歸道山，而吉雲亦早下世，感而有作，仍用前韻。吉雲詩才敏妙，遠出余上，小楷雅有董香光風格，其年尚未三旬，蘭摧玉折，可慨也夫)” *Xiuyu xu sao* (繡餘續草): 4 juan (Qing Guangxu 17 nian, 1891), 4.13b-.14a. Accessed August 5, 2024.

Gui Maoyi also had correspondence with male writers, such as:

Ji juanshaoyuan liuruipu jushi” (寄卷勺園劉瑞圃居士) [To Juanshao Yuan Liu Reipu Jushi]: “Since I bid farewell to Wonderland, I have been enveloped in a persistent melancholy, unable to bridge the distance between us in this world. I recall your visit to Luyangjin, where your talent and renown left me feeling deeply humbled. Few are as gifted as you, and your presence is deserving of being captured in a painting. As I read through the remaining chapters, a wave of sentimentality washed over me. The old songs of my life have fallen into disarray, compelling me to revisit and re-collect the manuscripts that have long been neglected on my desk.<sup>315</sup> Ji chenyunbo mingfu” (寄陳雲伯明府) [To Chen Yunbo Mingfu]: The clouds and water stretch endlessly, as the boat glides through the cold night. It has been a long time since we could see each other across Dooshan, so we can only convey our feelings through words. The silence is profound, with no sound except the tide, which has risen to the river’s edge, the howling wind, and the distant cries of geese.<sup>316</sup>

Both poems refer to the literary friendship with these two male writers. The second poem is sent to Chen Yunbo, whose real name is Chen Wenshu (陳文述, 1771-1843). He was a renowned scholar in the Jiangnan region during the Qing Dynasty, known for recruiting female disciples and compiling and publishing literary collections. Chen and Gui both hailed from Jiangnan, highlighting the characteristic of Chinese literati groups forming around regional affiliations. This phenomenon is evident in regional literary factions such as the Seven Scholars of Wuzhong and the Tongcheng School. Literati from various regions often increased their interactions through regional advantages, which was a natural occurrence in an era that lacked external communication methods other than written correspondence.

In addition to responding to others, writing inscriptions or poems for the collections or works of friends or family members also constitutes a form of interactive relationship. For example, Cao Zhenxiu’s “Ti yushan guixiu gui peishan shijuan” (題虞山閨秀歸佩珊詩卷) [Inscription on the Poetry Scroll of Lady Gui Peishan of Mount Yu]:

<sup>315</sup> Gui Maoyi, “Ji juanshaoyuan liuruipu jushi (寄卷勺園劉瑞圃居士) [To Juanshao Yuan Liu Reipu Jushi],” *Xiuyuxucao* (繡餘續草): 4 juan (Qing Guangxu 17 nian, 1891), 3.3a. Accessed August 5, 2024.

<sup>316</sup> Gui Maoyi, “Ji chenyunbo mingfu (寄陳雲伯明府) [To Chen Yunbo Mingfu],” *Xiuyuxucao*, 3.3b.

As an old woman managing the household, I feel ashamed of my lack of talent. The kitchen is cluttered with jars of pickles and salt, while the inkstone on my desk gathers dust. I envy your study, so pristine and clear, like water's pure reflection. You still find the leisure to compose poetry, gathering red blossoms and green leaves—truly, it fills me with admiration.<sup>317</sup>

Cao Zhenxiu's poem written for Gui Maoyi's collection reveals her awareness of the burdens women face in domestic life, expressing envy for Gui's ability to remain immersed in literature despite these challenges. Cao Zhenxiu also composed a preface for her sister's poetry collection, titled "Congmei qiongjuan shixu" (從妹瓊娟詩序) [Preface to My Sister Qiongjuan's Poems]. In this preface, she mentions that after the death of Qiongjuan's husband, she transitioned from being an uneducated young woman to finding solace in "writing with paper and ink" (以紙墨自遣)<sup>318</sup> during her widowhood. Although Cao acknowledges that,

The rhythm and meaning may not always be in harmony, and the solitary words and lines may not perfectly convey their sentiments, there is an unmistakable elegance and deep emotion that can be inferred from them, and thus, readers ought not to judge solely by skill.<sup>319</sup>

In her reading of the verses shared by Qiongjuan, Cao points out areas for improvement while simultaneously offering affirmation. She argues that Qiongjuan's poetry can showcase her personal qualities, suggesting that the inadequacies in literary technique are not grounds for harsh criticism at this time. Regarding her fellow female writer, Cao displays both admiration and encouragement. This undoubtedly serves as a positive affirmation of women's creative efforts: replacing criticism with recognition.

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<sup>317</sup> Cao Zhenxiu, "Ti yushan guixiu gui peishan shijuan (題虞山閨秀歸佩珊詩卷) [Inscription on the Poetry Scroll of Lady Gui Peishan of Mount Yu]," *Xieyunxuan xiaogao erjuan xu zengjuan* (寫韻軒小藁) [*Minor Drafts from the Studio of Harmonious Verses*] in *Yuanyatang quanji* (1815), 1.22a. Accessed August 9, 2024.

<sup>318</sup> Cao Zhenxiu, "Congmei qiongjuan shixu (從妹瓊娟詩序) [Preface to My Sister Qiongjuan's Poems]," *Xieyunxuan xiaogao erjuan xu zengjuan* (寫韻軒小藁) [*Minor Drafts from the Studio of Harmonious Verses*] in *Yuanyatang quanji* (1815), 2.7a. Accessed August 9, 2024.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.7a-2.7b.

Sun Yunfeng's works, such as "Pusaman: qiuye yu xianpin mei lianju (菩薩蠻：秋夜與仙品妹聯句) [Linked Verses with Xianpin on an Autumn Night],"<sup>320</sup> "Nanxiangzi: Yu xianpin mei huabie (南鄉子：與仙品妹話別) [Farewell to Sister Xianpin],"<sup>321</sup> "Qingpingyue: Yu xianpin mei lianju (清平樂：與仙品妹聯句) [Couplet with Sister Xianpin],"<sup>322</sup> and "Yiqin: Song xianpin mei (憶秦娥：送仙品妹) [Sending Off Sister Xianpin],"<sup>323</sup> serve as evidence of her literary interactions with female writers. Xianpin refers to her sister Sun Yunhe. Despite their familial relationship, viewing their connection through the lens of both being disciples of Yuan Mei and female writers allows for the interpretation of their exchanges as representative of female literary collaboration. This parallels the literary exchanges between Cao Zhenxiu and her sister Qiongjuan, reflecting the close ties between interpersonal networks and familial relationships among women who are both relatives and fellow writers.

From acquiring literacy to engaging in creative writing and subsequently entering the literary sphere to interact with other writers, women in the Ming and Qing dynasties faced numerous challenges akin to navigating obstacles in a game. They had to undergo rigorous trials to penetrate a male-dominated literary world. Fortunately, after mastering the cultural capital passed down through their families, these women could leverage their own talents to attract the assistance of willing male allies, facilitating literary exchanges with male authors. Simultaneously, they were also eager to establish friendships with fellow female writers

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<sup>320</sup> Sun Yunfeng, "Pusaman: qiuye yu xianpin mei lianju (菩薩蠻：秋夜與仙品妹聯句) [Linked Verses with Xianpin on an Autumn Night]," *Xiangyunguan ci* in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 17, 卷上.2b.

<sup>321</sup> Sun Yunfeng, "Nanxiangzi: Yu xianpin mei huabie (南鄉子：與仙品妹話別) [Farewell to Sister Xianpin]," *Xiangyunguan ci* in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 17, 卷上.5a.

<sup>322</sup> Sun Yunfeng, "Qingpingyue: Yu xianpin mei lianju (清平樂：與仙品妹聯句) [Couplet with Sister Xianpin]," *Xiangyunguan ci* in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 17, 卷上.5b.

<sup>323</sup> Sun Yunfeng, "Yiqin: Song xianpin mei (憶秦娥：送仙品妹) [Sending Off Sister Xianpin]," *Xiangyunguan ci* in Xu Naichang, *Xiaotan luanshi huike guixiu ci: fu guixiu cichao shi liujuan*, fasc 17, 卷上.5b.

through poetry and literature, and even formed literary organizations to collectively immerse themselves in the literary realm.

## **Chapter 5: The Illustration of Erotic Literature: The Perspective of Social Laws and Moral Norms toward the Sexual Imagination in Erotic Literature**

### *1. The Basic Stone of Social Laws and Moral Norms: From Confucianism to Neo-Confucianism*

Confucianism, originating with Confucius and Mencius, has evolved over centuries, influenced by Daoist and Buddhist thought. By the Song Dynasty, Western academic circles began referring to the Confucian revival as “Neo-Confucianism,” a term that highlights the development of Confucian theory by scholars such as Cheng Hao (1032–1085), Cheng Yi (1033–1107), Zhu Xi (1130–1200), and Lu Jiuyuan (alias Xiangshan, 1139–1192). This term continued into the Ming and Qing dynasties, particularly with the rise of the Wang Yangming School.

What distinguishes Neo-Confucianism from earlier Confucian thought? How did Confucian theories evolve from the Song to the Ming and Qing dynasties, especially in terms of discussions on human nature and character? Has Confucianism, as the ideological cornerstone of traditional Chinese society, undergone a transformation in its moral viewpoints through these theoretical changes? This chapter will explore these questions, focusing on the key points and differences in the transition from Confucianism to Neo-Confucianism, and the subsequent schools of thought.

Why is Confucianism in the Song and Ming Dynasties referred to as “Neo-Confucianism”? According to Tsung San Mou, there are two primary reasons for this transformation: first, Neo-Confucianism sought to re-establish the authentic tradition of Confucianism by returning to the classics such as the Mencius, Daxue [Great Learning], and Doctrine of the Mean. This return to foundational texts marked a revival of Confucian thought; second, in the Song Dynasty, Confucius was reasserted as the central figure in

Confucianism, with a renewed emphasis on his concept of benevolence. The Song Dynasty scholars aimed to align their interpretations more closely with the original teachings of Confucius and Mencius, rather than continuing the Han Dynasty's Confucian developments.<sup>324</sup> Initially, Confucianism was grounded in Confucius's ideas of benevolence and Mencius's theory that human nature is inherently good. It advocated for the active pursuit of good deeds, adherence to heavenly principles, and contributions to national harmony and peace. However, with the introduction of Buddhism during the Song Dynasty, Confucian scholars sought to revert to the Confucian ideals of the pre-Qin period, rather than adhering to the interpretations that had evolved since the Han Dynasty.<sup>325</sup> This reflects a renewed alignment between the Confucian thought of the Song and Ming dynasties and that of Confucius and Mencius. Additionally, Neo-Confucianism promoted and analyzed Confucian concepts related to heaven, humanity, nature, and principles through the perspectives of various scholars.

Since this chapter focuses on examining erotic literature through the lens of Confucian theory, it is important to discuss Neo-Confucianism's views on human nature and sexual desire. Neo-Confucianism, with its return to the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, encompasses several factions and representatives. These can be distinguished based on their differing theories of human nature and the mind: the school of "preserving natural principles and destroying human desires" headed by Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200), Cheng Hao (程顥, 1032-1085) and Cheng Yi (程頤, 1033-1107) in the Song Dynasty. After the middle of the Ming Dynasty, the school of sublation of mind led by Wang Gen, He Xinyin and Li Zhi also continued. There is a school of critical Neo-Confucianism headed by Luo Qinshun and Lu

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<sup>324</sup> Mou Tsung San, 牟宗三全集 05 心體與性體一 (*Complete Works of Mou Tsungsan, Volumes 05–07: Phenomenal Mind and Noumenal Nature, Parts I–III*) (New Taipei City: Linking Publishing Company, 2003), 15-8.

<sup>325</sup> Lao Szekwang, 新編中國哲學史 三上 (*New Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy, Volume 3, Part I*), 35.

Kun (呂坤, 1536-1618), as well as a school of unity of reason and desire proposed by Wang Fuzhi in the late Ming Dynasty.<sup>326</sup> Although classification is based on differences in explanations, the basis of each school's theory of human nature and human desires is based on *Li Ji* (禮記) [*The Book of Rites*]: *Yue Ji* (樂記) [*Record of Music*]:

Human beings have an inherent inclination towards silence, and it is natural for them to experience varying emotions in response to external stimuli. Through the perception of these external influences, individuals discern differences in their feelings, leading to the formation of preferences and aversions. (.....) Without self-reflection, individuals risk losing their natural principles—that is, their essential human nature.<sup>327</sup>

Although individuals are inherently endowed with nature, an unrestrained pursuit of external sensory desires can lead them to become “dead things,” aimlessly driven by their appetites. The contrast between the movement and stillness of human nature, as well as the internal versus external influences, in the *Li Ji* serves as a cautionary message against the unchecked growth of desires. This work underscores the importance of maintaining control over one's desires to preserve one's essential nature.

In the basic of the argument of “moderation of desire”, “Mr. Cheng posits that the human heart is inherently aware but becomes obscured by human desires, which distances it from the principles of Tian (Heaven). (程子曰，人心莫不有知，惟蔽於人慾，則亡天理也)”<sup>328</sup> Cheng Hao argues that desires should not dominate individuals; otherwise, the

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<sup>326</sup> Chen Jenkuen (陳振崑), “Contemporary Philosophical Thinking On “The Unity of Reason and Desires” of Wang Chuanshan] 明清之際王船山的「理欲合一」論,” *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture* (哲學與文化) 47, no. 1 (2020), 50-1.

<https://www.airitilibrary.com/Publication/alDetailedMesh?DocID=10158383-202001-202001160008-202001160008-43-62&PublishTypeID=P001>

<sup>327</sup> Dai Sheng (戴聖) ed., “Yue ji (樂記),” *Li ji* (禮記) [*The Book of Rites*] (明覆宋刊巾箱九經本, 1368-1644), 83. Accessed January 12, 2025.

[https://rbook.ncl.edu.tw/NCLSearch/Search/SearchDetail?item=5cb57577fa384284886f107ade185d36fDQwMjUz0.x3jEnDEvjUIHgonT\\_rKyw2eLDCI4rs1r6RjKPFNCC6c\\_&page=2&whereString=&sourceWhereString=&SourceID=0&HasImage=](https://rbook.ncl.edu.tw/NCLSearch/Search/SearchDetail?item=5cb57577fa384284886f107ade185d36fDQwMjUz0.x3jEnDEvjUIHgonT_rKyw2eLDCI4rs1r6RjKPFNCC6c_&page=2&whereString=&sourceWhereString=&SourceID=0&HasImage=)

<sup>328</sup> Hu Guang (胡廣), 性理大全書 (*The Complete Compendium of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*) (Included in the *Imperially Commissioned Siku Quanshu*, Section: *Masters (Zi bu)*.) Juan 50, Beijing: Thread-Binding Books Publishing House, 右 1. <https://archive.org/details/06051893.cn/page/n59/mode/2up>.

mind's perception becomes clouded, distancing it from the principles of Heaven. Zhu Xi advanced the theory of "preserving Heaven's principles and eliminating human desires," emphasizing that only by refraining from unrestrained pursuit of personal desires can one align with "natural principles" and fulfill human needs.<sup>329</sup> Lu Jiuyuan (陸九淵, 1139-1192) proposed that "The discussions surrounding the relationship between Heavenly principles and human desires are not necessarily absolute. If Heaven symbolizes principles and humanity represents desires, then Heaven and humanity are fundamentally distinct from one another. (天理人欲之言，亦自不是至論。若天是理，人是欲，則是天人不同矣)"<sup>330</sup> denying the absolute opposition between heavenly principles and human desires.<sup>331</sup> In the Ming Dynasty, Wang Shouren (王守仁, 1472–1529), also known as Yangmingzi, was a prominent representative of Neo-Confucianism. He used the analogy of a master and servant to elucidate the relationship between natural law and human desire. Wang argued that "natural law should be preserved and human desire eliminated (存天理，去人欲)," positioning human desire as a subordinate or servant. Generally, this implies that human behavior should align with the laws of nature.<sup>332</sup> Based on the above statements, it is evident that the scholars mentioned generally uphold natural principles as the primary criterion and view human desires as subordinate. They argue that individuals should not let desires prevail but should instead adhere to natural principles. In contrast, Lu Jiuyuan challenged this antagonistic view, denying the conflict between natural principles and human desires.

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<sup>329</sup> Chen Jenkuen, "Contemporary Philosophical Thinking On "The Unity of Reason and Desires" of Wang Chuanshan, 48.

<sup>330</sup> Lu Jiuyuan (陸九淵), "Yu lu (語錄) [Aphorisms]," *Lu xianshan quanji* (陸象山全集) [*Complete Works of Lu Xiangshan*]: Juan 34 (Taipei: World Journal Bookstore (世界書局), 1962), 252.

<sup>331</sup> Chen Jenkuen, "Contemporary Philosophical Thinking On "The Unity of Reason and Desires" of Wang Chuanshan, 49.

<sup>332</sup> Chen Jenkuen, "Contemporary Philosophical Thinking On "The Unity of Reason and Desires" of Wang Chuanshan, 50.

Beginning in the mid-Ming dynasty, the aforementioned discussions regarding the relationship between reason and desire prompted debates among Confucian scholars. Prominent among these were the Taizhou School (led by Wang Gen, He Xinyin, and Li Zhi) and figures such as Luo Qianshun and Lu Kun. The Taizhou School, composed primarily of disciples from commoner backgrounds, aimed to disseminate Confucian ethics thoroughly to the lower social strata. This dissemination did not imply that commoners were previously unbound by moral and ethical constraints; rather, it emphasized that the subjects of moral practice should encompass not only the political actions of the elite but also the general populace's engagement in governance for societal benefit.<sup>333</sup>

Li Zhi, a more radical thinker of the late Ming period, engaged in debates concerning human nature and emotions. In his work “On the Childlike Mind,” he advocated for adherence to genuineness as a means of addressing the hypocrisy and artificiality prevalent in social realities.<sup>334</sup> He argued that the childlike mind establishes the subjectivity of individual existence, presenting a concept of the coexistence of subjectivity and objectivity.<sup>335</sup> In contrast, Luo Qianshun explicitly addressed the morality of desire. He contended that traditional Confucianism advocates for the renunciation of desire, yet is desire not an inherent aspect of human nature? If one were to renounce desire, would that not also necessitate the elimination of emotions such as sadness or joy?<sup>336</sup> Represented by Li and Luo, both thinkers exemplify the re-evaluation of Li Xue and Xin Xue that began in the mid-Ming period,

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<sup>333</sup> Ruan Chunhui (阮春晖), “[The Moral Dimension of Taizhou School’s “Declaration Ethics”] 泰州学派“下达伦理”的道德之维,” *Studies in Ethics* (伦理学研究), no. 85 (2016), 39. Accessed July 25, 2024. <https://lx.hunnu.edu.cn/CN/abstract/abstract1030.shtml>.

<sup>334</sup> Martin W., *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*. 1st ed. Vol. 202 (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 39. Accessed July 13, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1tg5h57>.

<sup>335</sup> Tai Chinghsien (戴景賢), “[Li Zhi and Buddhism: An Analysis of the Basic Nature of Li Zhi’s Thought and Its Relation to Mahayana Doctrine] 李贄與佛教—論李贄思想之基本立場與其會通儒、釋之取徑,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 46, no. 3 (September 2016), 539. Accessed May 30, 2024.

<sup>336</sup> Martin W. Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*, 29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1tg5h57>.

emphasizing the importance of adhering to the natural essence and authenticity of human nature, wherein desire constitutes a fundamental aspect of human identity. Desire, therefore, is not a matter of black and white in relation to human nature. The richness and complexity of humanity stem precisely from its multitude of emotions and desires. When expressed through mediums such as literature, painting, or drama, desire serves as a legitimate manifestation of the human condition—no less authentic than crying in sorrow or laughing in joy.

In the late Ming Dynasty, Wang Fuzhi, when discussing the relationship between sex and reason, advocated:

Human nature inherently encompasses the five moral virtues—benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust. These virtues are harmoniously integrated with the four qualities of Heaven—Yuan (originality), Heng (permanence), Li (order), and Zhen (truthfulness). According to this perspective, human nature is not inherently opposed to these principles but rather aligns with them, without being in conflict with what is considered evil.<sup>337</sup>

The five constant elements of human nature—benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust—are closely integrated with the way of Heaven. This alignment underscores the inherent connection between human nature and the cosmic principles of Heaven. By accumulating virtue, human nature can evolve and harmonize with the way of Heaven, reflecting a state of congruence between human moral development and celestial order.<sup>338</sup> In the context of Neo-Confucianism and its discussions on human nature and desires, the topics of “the nature of food and sexual desire” and “the desire for sound, sexual desire, and smell”:

The concept of “Xing” refers to innate human nature. All human beings possess this inherent nature, which is universal and egalitarian. Consequently, moral qualities such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are inherent even in individuals of the most modest status and cannot be eradicated. Similarly, the capacity for sensory

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<sup>337</sup> Wang Fuzhi (王夫之), *Chuanshan quanshu* (船山全書: 第六冊) [*The Complete Works of Chuanshan: Volume 6*] (Changsha: 岳麓書社 (Yuelu Publishing House), 1996), 1051.

<sup>338</sup> Tsen Wenyin. “[Reason and Desire]-Wang Chuanshan’s New Views on Emotion, Talent, and Desire] 「罪情過欲」到「形色天性」—王船山的情欲論及其歷史地位,” *Journal of Chinese Language and Literature of National Taipei University* 9 (2011), 48.

and erotic desires is intrinsic to all humans and cannot be completely eliminated, even by the most virtuous individuals. Therefore, both moral virtues and desires are encompassed within the notion of “Xing.”<sup>339</sup>

From Wang Fuzhi’s perspective, the aspects of human nature related to “the nature of food and sexual desire” and the pursuit of sensory desires—such as those for sound, sexual desire, and smell—are inherent and cannot be eradicated or denied. The examples provided illustrate that Neo-Confucianism, as it developed through the late Ming Dynasty, adopted a relatively open attitude towards the less positive aspects of human nature, emphasizing the pursuit of external stimuli rather than solely focusing on the cultivation of the inner self.

Tracing the origins of the discussion on human “nature,” it becomes clear that Neo-Confucianism is rooted in “the metaphysics of morality,” which parallels “theology and religion that achieve virtue” and is committed to the expansion of “the science of mind.”<sup>340</sup> According to the aforementioned discussions on human desires by Confucian scholars, there is a generally unified moral standard: allowing desires to grow is considered immoral and deviates from the ideal of being a “moral person.” However, as times have evolved, it is important to recognize that this moral standard faces challenges. Whether it involves extreme indulgence in desires or the acknowledgment of the innate nature of humans to pursue desires, desire is no longer viewed as an unequivocal sin. This reflects the more open aspect of Neo-Confucian moral concepts that emerged after the mid-Ming Dynasty.

## 2. Exemplification: Chinese Literary Criticism Theory

### 2.1. Classic Works and Concepts: *Dianlun* (典論), *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (文心雕龍)

<sup>339</sup> Wang Fuzhi, *Chuanshan quanshu* (船山全書: 第十二冊) [*The Complete Works of Chuanshan: Volume 12*] (Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House, 1996), 128.

<sup>340</sup> Mou Tsung San, 牟宗三全集 05 心體與性體一 (*Complete Works of Mou Tsungsan, Volumes 05–07: Phenomenal Mind and Noumenal Nature, Parts I–III*), 12.

Cao Pi's "Dianlun" (典論) is widely regarded as the first dedicated work of literary criticism in Chinese history. He posits that "the essence of writing lies in its spirit; the clarity and turbidity of this spirit are substantial, and one cannot forcefully impose it."<sup>341</sup> In this work, he introduces the concept of "literary spirit (*qi*)" and categorizes it into clear and turbid distinctions. The connection between literary talent and *qi* "originates from the theory of disposition during the Han dynasty and realizes the traditional critics notion of 'the unity of the literati.'"<sup>342</sup> He further states, "Indeed, writing is the great undertaking of statecraft, an immortal event. The years of life are finite, and the joys of fame are limited to oneself. While both are inevitable phases of existence, they pale in comparison to the boundlessness of writing."<sup>343</sup> This emphasizes the idea among Chinese literati of establishing one's identity through words. By conveying personal thoughts and reflections through literature and writing, one not only expresses the ambitions and aspirations of a literatus but also confronts a challenge: what constitutes a work that is worthy of enduring legacy and praise from future generations? Thus, the clarity of literary *qi*, where a piece is naturally expressive without artificial embellishments, becomes a characteristic ideal of literary excellence as envisioned by Cao Pi.

Liu Xie (劉勰, 465-522), during the Southern Dynasties under the Liang dynasty, laid the foundation for Chinese literary criticism with his work 文心雕龍 (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*). He states:

In the composition of essays, memorials, proclamations, and discussions, one should adhere to elegance; in rhapsodies, hymns, songs, and poems, one should aspire to clarity and beauty; in talismans, edicts, letters, and notices, one should follow the

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<sup>341</sup> Cao Pi, Yunwu Wang ed., "Lun wen (論文)," 典論及其他三種 (*Dianlun and Three of Others*) (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1936), 1.

<sup>342</sup> Li Sungjyun (李松駿), "[On the Doctrine of Ch'i and the Practice of Self-cultivation in Liu Xie's *Wenxindiaolong*] 論劉勰《文心雕龍》之氣論問架及其工夫論實踐," *Studies In Chinese Literature*, no. 38 (July 2014), 49. Accessed October 1, 2024. [https://doi.org/10.29419/SICL.201407\\_\(38\).0002](https://doi.org/10.29419/SICL.201407_(38).0002).

<sup>343</sup> Cao Pi, Yunwu Wang ed., "Lun wen," *Dianlun and Three of Others*, 1-2.

models of clarity and precision; in histories, commentaries, prefaces, and annotations, one should strive for rigor; in admonitions, inscriptions, steles, and elegies, one should embody profundity in structure; in linked verses and seven-character phrases, one should engage in clever and resplendent expressions.<sup>344</sup>

This suggests that literary forms, such as poetry and rhapsody, which possess particularly rich artistic qualities, emphasize writing style and the clarity and elegance of word choice more than administrative documents. In other words, literary intent must be pure and just, while the vocabulary should be ornate and skillfully employed.<sup>345</sup>

The literary spirit discussed in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* addresses the psychological aspects of literature, while the carving of dragons pertains to the techniques of writing—rhetoric and grammar. Much of the content reflects the collective views of the Zhaoming group and the perspectives of the gentry class.<sup>346</sup>

During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the theoretical value of Chinese literary criticism was essentially established and affirmed by various scholars and literati. The act of writing literature transcends mere expression of pure thoughts; crafting a “good” piece of writing inevitably influences the author’s considerations during the creative process.

The ideological connotations of Confucianism are reflected in Liu Xie’s criteria for evaluating literature in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*.<sup>347</sup> Liu Xie and his contemporaries even considered literature to be an extension of the teachings of Confucian sages. Similarly, Zhong Rong (鍾嶸, 468-518), who, like Liu Xie, came from a “northern émigré family,” utilized the three-tier grading system—Shang ping (上品) [top], Zhong ping

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<sup>344</sup> Liu Xie (劉勰), “Dingshi (定勢),” *Wenxindiaolong shijuan* (文心雕龍十卷) [*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons in Ten Volumes*] (歙邑汪一元校刊本, 1540), 78. Accessed November 2, 2024. [https://rbook.ncl.edu.tw/NCLSearch/Search/SearchDetail?item=cdf188dce24340af88c666dce70b6d83fdQwNzc0MA2.R2a6gRP3c0zw7JA4mKH0UGRRO\\_6DSlhgHUbGYrvTcTc\\_&page=3&whereString=&sourceWhereString=&SourceID=0&HasImage=](https://rbook.ncl.edu.tw/NCLSearch/Search/SearchDetail?item=cdf188dce24340af88c666dce70b6d83fdQwNzc0MA2.R2a6gRP3c0zw7JA4mKH0UGRRO_6DSlhgHUbGYrvTcTc_&page=3&whereString=&sourceWhereString=&SourceID=0&HasImage=).

<sup>345</sup> Lu Wujyu (呂武志), “[How the Reference and Creation of Liu Xie’s “Wen Xin Diao Long” to Two Lu Brothers’ Literary Theory] 劉勰《文心雕龍》對二陸兄弟文論的參酌與開創,” *Studies in Sinology* (中國學術年刊), no. 44 (2022), 64. DOI : 10.6238/SIS.202203\_(44-1).03.

<sup>346</sup> Wang Mengou (王夢鷗), Gao Dawei (高大威) ed., 王夢鷗先生文心雕龍講記 (*Mr. Wang Meng'ou's Notes on the Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*), Taipei: Showwe Information Co., Ltd. (2009), 43.

<sup>347</sup> Sun Chang Kang-i, and Stephen Owen, eds, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature. Volume 1, To 1375*, 258.

(中品) [middle], and Xia ping (下品) [lower]—from the central government to assess Chinese literature in his 詩品 [*Gradations of Poets*]. This reflects the shared cultural and political context of their time.<sup>348</sup> Xiao Tong (蕭統, 501-531) compiled 昭明文選 [*Wex xuan* or *Selections of Refined Literature*] with the criterion of including works that exhibit “the splendor of diction;” this represents a rigorous standard for literary aesthetic evaluation.<sup>349</sup> As illustrated in the preceding examples, the assessment of poetry significantly influenced the selection criteria for literary anthologies. Thus, clarity, elegance, and beauty became essential qualities for literary works, particularly for poetry and rhapsody. Otherwise, such works would be subject to scrutiny and criticism by literati.

Not only these works focus on literary criticism, but also history books often contain value judgments on the literary atmosphere and content of previous dynasties. 隋書 [*The History of the Sui*] compiled in the Tang Dynasty can be seen as inheriting the literary evaluation standards of wen and zi, so it has “if one could take the pure sound from that side and cut down long-winded sentences on this side, so that each will discard its failings and the strengths will be combined, then pattern [wen] and substance [zhi] will be balanced, and perfection achieved.”<sup>350</sup> Regarding contemporary thinkers of the Ming Dynasty, Xu Guangqi (徐光啓, 1562-1633) posits that elegance is characterized by difficulty, subtlety, restraint, and bitterness, whereas vulgarity is associated with ease, sensory excess, indulgence, and sweetness. Xu concludes that elegance embodies moral and aesthetic rigor, emphasizing balance and order, while vulgarity prioritizes sensual pleasure.<sup>351</sup> The elegance of literature

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<sup>348</sup> Sun Chang Kang-i and Stephen Owen eds, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature Volume 1, To 1375*, 259.

<sup>349</sup> Zhang Longxi, “The Rise of Wen or Literature: The Southern and the Northern Dynasties,” in *A History of Chinese Literature*, 82-3.

<sup>350</sup> Sun Chang Kang-i and Stephen Owen eds, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature Volume 1, To 1375*, 276-7.

<sup>351</sup> Li Waiyee, *The Promise and Peril of Things : Literature and Material Culture in Late Imperial China*, New York: Columbia University Press (2022), 96. <https://doi.org/10.7312/li--20102>.

and its symbolic essence have been enduring elements within Chinese literary criticism for several centuries. This long-standing tradition is reflected in the evaluation of women's works and remains applicable.

The Confucian rejection or exclusion of *yanqing* stems from a fear of uncontrolled emotional expression. In other words, there is a perceived risk that words expressing emotions and arousing desires could undermine societal norms and morality. While the perspectives of classical literary criticism may inherit such ideas, this does not imply that *yanqing* is not written about, nor does it suggest that the authors who engage in writing *yanqing* are exceptional cases.

## *2.2. Inheritance and Innovation: Ming Qing Writers' Literary Criticism Toward Erotic Literature*

“The cult of *qing* had a direct impact on literary criticism.”<sup>352</sup> In the tradition of Chinese literary criticism, the evaluation of literature employs specific terminology: *qing* (清) and *zhou* (濁). *Qing* represents purity, devoid of ulterior motives, secular concerns, or vulgar characteristics. Women's poetry particularly embodies these qualities, whereas men, in their pursuit of artistic expression, often compromise the purity of literature.<sup>353</sup> The male literati's imagination and expectations regarding women's works align with the traditional feminine perception of delicacy. Furthermore, from the perspective of literary standards that prioritize *qing*, the tendency to pursue literary techniques results in a subtle reflection of the male literati's general underestimation of the technical prowess inherent in women's works.

Using *qing* as the standard for evaluating the quality of literary works is similarly applicable in the selection of women's writings. During the Ming Dynasty, the literary figure

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<sup>352</sup> W. L. Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 350.

<sup>353</sup> Sun Chang Kang-i, “Gender and Canonicity: Ming-Qing Women Poets in the Eyes of the Male Literati,” 5.

Tian Yihen (田藝衡, 1524-1591), in his preface to the women's poetry anthology *Shinu shi* (詩女史) [*Female Historiographer of Poetry*], specifically addressed the genres of palace poetry and the poetry of ladies. He asserted that:

Both palace verses and lady's compositions should be included in the canon; even vernacular and lascivious verses ought not to be excluded from refined literature. For beauty and ugliness are discernible, thus the principles of encouragement and admonition remain.<sup>354</sup>

The standards for the evaluation and compilation of women's writings largely remain in a contradictory state: should they adhere to poetic instruction or be broadly selected without exception? If, as Tian suggests, the determination of beauty or ugliness is left to the readers' discretion, how would the evaluation of *yanqing* works be shaped?

First, we discuss the perspective of male literati. Liang Xiaoyu "Secret Garden" poem: Because Liang disagrees with the traditional view of "women maintaining chastity for their lovers", other critics criticized "How is it possible that one cannot find a single outstanding phrase in all her hundreds of poems?"<sup>355</sup> Wang Wei, a renowned courtesan of the late Ming Dynasty, is noted in the anthology *Zhongxiang ci* (眾香詞) [*Fragrant Verses*] compiled by Xu Shumin (徐樹敏) for her literary talent, which is described as "her poetry is graceful and elegant, comparable to that of Li Qingzhao (李清照, 1084-1155) and Zhu Shuzhen (朱淑真, 1135-1180)."<sup>356</sup>

Tang Sunhua (唐孫華), in his preface to *Ningcuilou ji* (凝翠樓集) [*Collected Works of the Ningcui Pavilion*] by Wang Hui (王慧), writes:

In the preface to the poetry of Zhong Rong, it is stated: 'In the Han dynasty, Li Ling was the first to compose five-character verses; contemporaries such as Wang Yangming and Ma Zong competed in elegant lyricism, yet their names were seldom

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<sup>354</sup> Tian Yihen (田藝衡), "Shinu shi xu (詩女史序) [Preface to the *Female Historiographer of Poetry*]," in Wenkai Hu ed., *A Study on Women's Writings in Successive Dynasties* (Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1985), 876.

<sup>355</sup> W. L. Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 362.

<sup>356</sup> Xu Naichang, "Wang wei luezhuan (王微略傳) [Biography of Wang Wei]," *Guixiu cichao*, fasc. 23, 6.12a.

heard. From Li Duwei to Ban Jieyu, there was but one woman in a hundred years.’ Who says that the female gender, represented by the veil and scarf, is unrelated to literary pursuits? In my hometown, there is Madame Wang, known for her elegance, who is the eldest daughter of Mr. Wang Changyuan, a respected scholar. (.....) Madame Wang was born into a distinguished family and embodies a noble character. She is astute and knowledgeable in etiquette, having thoroughly studied the Book of Songs and the works of the Hundred Schools, leaving no text unread. (.....) While there are occasional women capable of composing poetry within the inner chambers, they mostly engage in composing decorative verses, adorned with flowers and colors, producing short and sweet lines that are merely graceful and charming. However, Madame Wang’s work is characterized by genuine depth, showcasing intricate quality. (.....) Such literary accomplishments are often beyond the reach of male scholars; how can they be compared to the work of women in the inner quarters? Observing her distant inspirations and the refinement of her language, one can see that her work truly aligns with the elegant traditions of the Nanqu of the Southern Kingdoms, emphasizing propriety and righteousness, and stands in stark contrast to the later works of Yutai and Xianglan, which are characterized by delicate and soft themes.<sup>357</sup>

This passage not only references Zhong Rong’s literary criticism as a standard but also highlights the plight of women in the literary arena: the scarcity of attention they receive and the limited scope of the subjects they are allowed to write about. Tang categorizes works that emulate the grand style of the Nanqu as orthodox and exemplary, while disparaging the Xianglan style, which embodies themes of emotional expression.

In the Qing Dynasty, Fang Zanzheng (方贊清) wrote a preface for *Youchengtang yin gao* (有誠堂吟稿) [*Poetry Manuscripts from Youcheng Hall*], noting the scarcity of works by female poets while also acknowledging the traditional roles assigned to women. This highlights the dilemma faced by female creators: how to balance societal roles with the expression of literary talent. He stated:

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<sup>357</sup> Tang Sunhua (唐孫華), “Tang sunhua xu (唐孫華序) [Preface by Tang Sunhua],” *Ningcuilou ji* (凝翠樓集) [*Collected Works of the Ningcui Pavilion*] (The 47th Year of Kangxi Reign (1708) Zhu Family’s Silver Raft Pavilion Fine-Edition Print), 唐孫華序 1a-2b. Accessed August 12, 2024.

Our clan moved from Xinan to Huaiyang, and those who gained renown through poetry are numerous; many have engraved their works for the world, propagating their names across the poetic circle, to the extent that almost everyone has a collection, and their doors are resplendent. Yet, the poetry of virtuous women is seldom heard.<sup>358</sup>

Moreover, male literati typically expected women's works to adhere to standards of elegance and beauty. Thus, Fang Zhanqing employed such descriptors to praise the works of Fang Yanzhen (方彦珍). He remarked:

Her prose is dignified and refined, and amidst its elegance and delicacy, it conveys a sense of quietude and steadfastness. Reciting her poems reflects her virtues, for she must be filial to her mother-in-law and respectful to her husband, maintaining a solemn and harmonious atmosphere within the inner chamber. It is not merely the embellishment of fragrant verses but a sincere acknowledgment of her achievements as a literary woman. She graces her family and enhances her husband's standing.<sup>359</sup>

The creative endeavors and evaluations of women's works remain largely confined within the framework of domestic life. Jiang Fan (江夔), while composing a preface for his sister Jiang Lan's (江蘭) *Yiyunlou wenxuan* (倚雲樓文選) [*Selected Literary Works from the Leaning-on-Clouds Pavilion*], noted:

My sister is well-versed in the Three Rites, and her inner thoughts seldom emerge. When she occasionally picks up a brush, it is merely for her own delight; publishing her works, even if done in jest, may not align with her true aspirations. Upon reflection, it is evident that although there have been numerous accomplished women throughout history, how often are they recognized? The poems they create on love are often dismissed as trivial. Despite possessing genuine sentiments, the portrayal of romantic affection becomes the basis for male criticism of their work's value.<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Fang Yanzhen (方彦珍), “方贊清序 [Preface by Fang Zhanqing],” *Youchengtang yin gao* (有誠堂吟稿) [*Poetry Manuscripts from Youcheng Hall*] (Daoquang 4 nian 1824), 序.5a. Accessed August 1, 2024.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Jiang Lan (江蘭), “Jiangfan xu (江夔序) [Preface by Jian Fan],” *Yiyunlou wenxuan* (倚雲樓文選) [*Selected Literary Works from the Leaning-on-Clouds Pavilion*]: 1 juan (Kangxi Reign), 序.5b-6a. Accessed August 1, 2024. <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/results-work.php>.

This statement reveals a shared predicament faced by talented women: while expressing the emotional nuances of love is part of their daily lives, it simultaneously becomes a target for male critiques of the worth of their literary contributions.

In “Maogan tici” (毛淦題辭) [Inscription by Mao Gan], Pan Shuzheng observes that: ...the burden of cooking and sewing is arduous to endure; I am still able to compose poetry daily. With each stroke of my brush, I sweep away the lines about flowers and the moon, thus knowing that women’s talents surpass those of men. (In the complete collection, there is not a single verse about the romance of flowers and the moon).<sup>361</sup>

This inscription not only reflects the busy domestic responsibilities shouldered by women, often with little support in terms of household assistance or literary encouragement, but it also highlights the limited recognition of their literary contributions. The remark “In the complete collection, there is not a single verse about the romance of flowers and the moon” further illustrates the male author’s perspective on women’s works: that the absence of descriptions related to ephemeral fantasies and unrealistic romantic imaginings serves as a foundation for women’s literary achievements to be considered on par with those of men.

In the preface to Yuan Jingrong’s poetry collection, Luo Benzhou (羅本周, 1766-1850) states:

Ritual emphasizes gentleness and sincerity, and poetry serves to educate in cultivating virtuous character and refining emotions. One cannot grasp its essence without reading the poetry of the ancients, nor can one express their innermost feelings without composing their own poetry.<sup>362</sup>

Here, she underscores that poetry adhering to the principles of traditional ritual and morality must embody qualities of “gentleness and sincerity,” thereby serving a positive function in the cultivation of one’s character and nature. Although Luo Benzhou is a woman, her

<sup>361</sup> Pan Shuzheng, “Maogan tici (毛淦題辭) [Inscription by Mao Gan],” *Yihonglou shicao* (倚紅樓詩草) [*Leaning on the Red Chamber: Draft Poems*] (Qing Guangxu 17 nian, 1891), 題辭 1.4a-1.4b. Accessed August 5, 2024. <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/results-work.php>.

<sup>362</sup> Yuan Jingrong, “Luo benzhou xu (羅本周序) [Preface by Luo Benzhou],” *Yuequxuan shicao* (月蕖軒詩草) [*Poetry Drafts from the Moon Lotus Pavilion*] (Shanghai: Daoguang ren chen, 1832), 4.9b-4.10a.

evaluation of poetry remains rooted in traditional poetic values, adhering to the standards of propriety and elegance.

Wu Xiao's "Nujunzi xing bing xu" (女君子行并序) [The Conduct of Female Gentlemen and Its Preface] states, "In the classic poem Guan Ju, distinction is valued; the male and female roles differ in social conduct, and during nighttime, it is essential to have candles."<sup>363</sup> and "When offering food, one should serve with a respectful demeanor, treating the guests with solemnity."<sup>364</sup> This poem emphasizes the alignment of Wu Xiao with traditional moral principles regarding the social roles of men and women. The subtitle asserts:

Most of the collections of poems by ladies published in the Wuzhong area are frivolous and unrefined works, primarily describing the life of women in the boudoir. This is not appropriate for a woman's writing. There are ancient yuefu (樂府) poems with titles like '君子行 [The Journey of a Gentleman],' but why are there no female gentlemen? In my spare time, I try to write under the title 'Female Gentleman (女君子).' The poems from Wuzhong are filled with superficial and trivial expressions that do not represent the words of women. Since ancient Yuefu includes 'The Journey of a Gentleman,' surely there cannot be a lack of female gentlemen? I attempt to compose such works.<sup>365</sup>

Wu Xiao not only articulates her ideal approach to male-female interactions, which conforms to traditional rituals, but also critiques the contemporary content of women's literary collections, arguing that works should meet the standards of refinement and elegance characteristic of gentlemen. In contrast to her personal literary creations, which are broadly characterized by *qing* sentiments and the tradition of floral beauty, she indeed has a few works with similar themes (as cited in Chapter III). A closer examination of her poetry reveals that her works focus primarily on the portrayal of women's appearances, devoid of

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<sup>363</sup> Wu Xiao, "Nujunzi xing bing xu (女君子行并序) [The Conduct of a Female Gentleman, with Preface]," *Xiaoxuean tiyong* (嘯雪庵題詠) [*Inscriptions and Poems at Xiaoxue Hermitage*]: 1 juan (1644-1722), 題詠.46b-47a. Accessed August 5, 2024.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

any erotic elements. The *yan* in *yanqing* should not serve as a focal point for criticism; rather, it is essential to consider the *qing* depicted within.

Gu Ruopu states in “延師訓女或有諷者故作解嘲” [On the Instruction of Women, or the Use of Irony to Express My Discontent]:

When the two forms first separated, it began the principles of human relations. The Master established righteousness; women of the family should remain chaste. If one does not engage in poetry or literature, how can one fully realize their nature? An old woman scorns me, claiming that a woman’s virtue is not accomplished. If one seeks to instruct women, is it merely for the sake of gaining reputation, forsaking those feminine qualities, and merely practicing diligently? I have heard these words but fail to resonate with my feelings. Life presents differences, and the purity of a woman’s virtue is challenging to attain. How can one, in the confines of the boudoir, not learn from the ancients?<sup>366</sup>

In contrast to the aforementioned standards by male and female writers in evaluating women’s works, Gu questions the traditional expectation of women’s virtue: if women are to adhere to these principles, how can they achieve fulfillment in both life and spirit? When extended to their writings, women’s works serve merely as a means of emotional expression, which reflects the *qing* aspect of *yanqing*. Therefore, to evaluate women’s writings solely based on the standards of female virtue raises questions of fairness and overlooks the fundamental “human” identity that women share with men.

The Qing dynasty female writer Gui Maoyi, along with Yuan Mei’s female disciple Xi Peilan (席佩蘭), gained significant acclaim in the literary world. In Gui’s anthology, *Xiuyuxucao* (繡餘續草), there are numerous poems that depict natural scenery and plants, as well as several poems she composed as titles for the artworks and literary works of others. Among the poems addressing *yanqing* works, the piece titled “Ti zai sheng yuan chuanqi”

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<sup>366</sup> Gu Ruopu, “Yanshi xunnu huo youfengzhe gu zuo jiechao (延師訓女或有諷者故作解嘲) [On the Instruction of Women, or the Use of Irony to Express My Discontent],” *Woyuxuan gao* (臥月軒稿) [Collected Writings from the Reclining Moon Pavilion] in *Wu elin wang zhe yi zhu qianbian* (Jiahuitang Ding Shi Edition, between 1875-1900), 2.1b-2.2a. Accessed August 11, 2024.

(題再生緣傳奇) [On the Legend of Rebirth] stands out. “Rebirth” (Zai sheng yuan) is a *yanqing* narrative written during the Qing dynasty, authored by Chen Duansheng (陳端生, 1751-1796), who is also a female writer:

Blossoms of the silk tree unfold upon my pen,  
Graceful tones weave verses anew in the *Jade Terrace*'s embrace.  
In this world, good destinies often bear flaws,  
Yet to mend these rifts, one needs the skill of *Nuwa*'s grace.

Whether fates are shallow or deep,  
The river of love stirs with waves that rise and sweep.  
Mirrored shadows of phoenixes may part,  
Yet they'll reunite, for passion speaks through the leaves' heart.

I've sown three thousand peach and plum trees,  
With brows like moths, delicate as fine cloth's tease.  
Measured by jade rulers, my standards hold firm,  
While gentle gauze allows tender worship to affirm.

In the spring hall, I wield the brush with pride,  
Embracing the celestial class, with beauty as my guide.  
Like Guanyin's visage, serene as moonlit streams,  
How could such intoxicating grace hide beneath dreams?

Among women, I stand as the finest flower,  
With humble men yielding to my power.  
Not for wealth nor the joys of earthly kin,  
In the end, it's the Guanju that leads love to begin.

In this lifetime, our destinies entwine anew,  
Let us forge a bond, as steadfast as morning dew.  
Under the bright moon, may flowers bloom side by side,  
In this world, how could my heart not abide by your guide?<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Gui Maoyi, “Ti zai sheng yuan chuanqi” (題再生緣傳奇) [On the Legend of Rebirth], *Xiuyuxucao*, 題辭 1.4a-1.4b.

Chen Duansheng's writing transcends the realm of a mere vulgar love story between men and women; it profoundly illuminates the female perspective. Gui Maoyi acknowledges Chen's literary talent, noting that not only does she delve into the depths of love, but she also breaks new ground with her choice of a female protagonist who disguises herself as a man. The modern literary scholar Chen Yinke (陳寅恪) further emphasizes that it is Chen Duansheng's incorporation of her self-image into the overall narrative that creates a resonant interplay between the real and the imagined, imbuing the work with deeper significance.<sup>368</sup> Beneath the surface of *yanqing*, the incorporation of a woman's voice and experiences embodies the true value of the creative process.

The renowned Qing Dynasty novel *The Story of the Stone* (紅樓夢) is recorded from the perspective of a male author and male characters, focusing on the dynamics of male-female relationships.<sup>369</sup> The author Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹, 1710-1765), uses the character Baoyu (寶玉) and the narrative of the entire novel to convey a complex view of sexual desire. According to Cao, sex is not merely a physiological act (i.e., a realistic depiction) but also a narrative construct involving a network of textual and intertextual references.<sup>370</sup> *The Stone's* critique of romances, erotic or boudoir-related novels<sup>371</sup> as obscene and immoral does not imply that Cao and *The Story of the Stone* are detached from these genres. On the contrary, the novel builds upon and expands the thematic foundation laid by these earlier works,

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<sup>368</sup> Zhang Sijing (張思靜), "[Methodology, Perspective, and Cultural Context: *Lun Zaishengyuan* and Its Significance in the History of Chinese Literary Criticism] 方法•視野•文化脈絡：中國文學批評史上的《論再生緣》," *Journal of Chinese Studies* (中國文化研究所學報), no. 55, July 2012, 235. [https://doi.org/10.29708/JCS.CUHK.201207\\_\(55\).0009](https://doi.org/10.29708/JCS.CUHK.201207_(55).0009).

<sup>369</sup> *The Story of the Stone* is a novel set against the backdrop of the rise and fall of an aristocratic family, exploring the interactions of the main character Baoyu with the women in his family, encompassing friendship, familial affection, and romantic love. The narrative revolves around the theme of dreams, illustrating that the world's splendor and desires ultimately amount to nothing more than a dream from which one must awaken. Research centered on *The Story of the Stone* is particularly prolific, leading to the term "Hongxue" (紅學) being coined to refer to studies related to the novel.

<sup>370</sup> I-Hsien Wu, "Lust as Prerequisite: Eroticism in *The Story of the Stone*," 132.

<sup>371</sup> This includes yeishi (野史), such as *Sui Yangdi Yanshi* (隋煬帝艷史) and *Ruyijun Zhuan* (如意君傳) [*The Tale of Master Ru Yi*], as mentioned in Chapter III.

developing a more comprehensive and nuanced exploration of sexual desire.<sup>372</sup> Regardless of gender, the depiction of emotions in Chinese literature has reached another level: rather than shying away from discussions of sexual desire, it uses them as a means to explore the essence of love and reflect on interactions between the sexes.

Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873-1929), an important intellectual in China in the late Qing Dynasty, commented in the article “Lun nuxu (論女學) [Argument on women’s learning].”<sup>373</sup> The article presents a reflection on talented women. Women who possess musical and literary talents can be considered talented individuals; however, a true talented woman is one who, having acquired such knowledge and skills, applies them for the benefit of others.<sup>374</sup> What constitutes the image of a talented woman? Should women only write about romantic themes, or must they strive for breakthroughs? Does writing sensual works imply a lack of progress? The core of these inquiries lies in the literary value and the societal role of women. Ultimately, it is about disregarding gender and focusing on the writing techniques and the inspirational content of the works. More importantly, it involves listening to the emotions and thoughts of the authors.

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<sup>372</sup> Wu Ihsien, “Lust as Prerequisite: Eroticism in *The Story of the Stone*,” 132-4.

<sup>373</sup> This article is extracted from one of Liang’s works, “Bianfa tongyi” (變法通議) [General Discussions on Reform]. Liang Qichao, Zhijun Tang and Renje Tang ed., “Argument on women’s learning,” 梁啟超全集 (*The Complete Works of Liang Qichao*) (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2018), 71-6.

<sup>374</sup> Masako Kohama, *Gender History in China*, 384.

## Conclusion

Since the Jin and Tang dynasties, the records of inscriptions on metal and stone (known as *Jinshi zhi*) rarely feature the names of women. In the Tang dynasty, Gao Shi, the wife of Fang Lin, left behind two stele inscriptions. However, Ouyang Xiu (歐陽脩, 1007-1072) suspected that some enthusiasts falsely attributed these works to her, especially since they resembled the style of the later calligrapher Guan Daosheng, whose work itself could not escape the shadow of Songxue Daoren (Zhao Mengfu, 趙孟頫, 1254-1322). Such suspicions seem almost laughable. Could it be that, for over a thousand years, no woman within the inner chambers of their homes could master the art of calligraphy? Or is it that the literati, too proud to elevate women above themselves, refused to recognize their talents, and thus their work went uncelebrated? These thoughts came to me when I happened upon an inscription on a brick tower, inspiring me to record this reflection.<sup>375</sup>

The visibility of women in literary history has evolved over centuries, from being questioned by the literati and scarcely mentioned in historical records, to the Ming and Qing dynasties when women were able to produce and publish their own works. These writings often explored the portrayal and imagination of female identity through *yanqing* themes, expressing personal emotions toward love and relationships. This shift was influenced by factors such as the development of the courtesan culture, the rise of commercial prosperity, and the transformative impact of Neo-Confucian thought.

Strictly speaking, *xianglian* style and *yanqing* poetry were often looked down upon by literati who adhered to traditional concepts of propriety and literary criticism. This is evident in Wang Hui's poem: "The cold northern wind tears paper and ruins thatched huts, glimpsing *donglang*'s splendid old verses. Pitying the remnants scattered in disarray, I brush away the spider webs with my sleeve."<sup>376</sup> The author of this *xianglian* poem is none other than Han

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<sup>375</sup> Cao Zhenxiu, "Ba zi lin zhuan ming (跋自臨壇塔銘) [Colophon on the Inscription of the Linzhuan Pagoda]," *Xieyunxuan xiaogao erjuan xu zengjuan* (寫韻軒小藁) [*Minor Drafts from the Studio of Harmonious Verses*] in *Yuanyatang quanji* (1815), 2.14b-2.15a. Accessed August 9, 2024.

<sup>376</sup> Wang Hui, "Ye su tianjia ou jian huchuang pozhi youju nai hanzhiguang xianglian shi ye xi er fu zhi (夜宿田家偶見糊窗破紙有句乃韓致光香奩詩也惜而賦之) [Moved to write upon seeing a line from Han Zhiguang's Fragrant Toilet Case poem on a torn window paper during a night's lodging at a rural home]," *Ningcuilou ji* (Kangxi year 47 朱氏銀槎閣精刊本), juan 2 2a-2b. Accessed August 12, 2024.

Wo (韓偓, 842-914), a master of the *xianglian* style. Despite the criticisms these works faced in the literary world, Wang Hui expresses sorrow at the poem's current neglected state. However, compared to the periods before the Ming and Qing dynasties, has there been progress? The answer is undoubtedly affirmative. The scope and volume of women's creative works significantly increased, and through the literati networks, women began to move beyond the confines of the inner chamber and engage more with society.

The writings of women, constrained by traditional frameworks, were often limited in their full expression of ideas, even when they hoped to convey their personal thoughts through their creations. Take Chen Yunlian (陳蘊蓮, 1800-1860) as an example. In her preface, she articulates a sense of ambition, arguing that her work does not need to rely on content that conforms to notions of "virtue" in order to gain widespread recognition for its literary talent.<sup>377</sup> Just as a painter may project their self onto the objects they depict, a female painter is both creator and the object of aesthetic contemplation.<sup>378</sup> In literary creation, do female authors similarly engage in self-projection? A close analysis reveals differences in male and female perspectives. Male authors, especially in *yanqing* novels, often focus on creating bold, erotic atmospheres, with explicit depictions of sexual fantasies and even sexual organs. In contrast, female authors in *yanqing* poetry or *ci* adopt more subtle expressions, placing greater emphasis on emotional depth and the portrayal of female beauty. When contrasting *yan* and *qing*, male authors often focus on *yan*, while female authors prioritize *qing*. This stylistic distinction resembles how a French female journalist for *Le Journal de Shanghai* wrote about Chinese female celebrities with an appreciation of their intellectual charm and passionate femininity from an equal, ordinary woman's perspective. Equality,

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<sup>377</sup> Yang Binbin, "The "Self's" Dilemma: Illness and Autobiographical Desire in the Poetry Collection of a Qing-Dynasty Woman Poet," 103.

<sup>378</sup> Li Waiyee, *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature*, 354-5.

respect, and understanding are the advantages that women have when writing about women.<sup>379</sup>

As noted, “The impetus of literary creation is thus not simply “responding to things”—it is a mutual engagement of mind and things that confirms meaningful patterns underlying both.”<sup>380</sup> Literature acts as a channel of communication, connecting the author and reader, and, more importantly, linking the author’s responses to their observations and thoughts. “The distinction between literature and escapism is the same as that between desire and wish,”<sup>381</sup> and “Worthwhile literature reawakens us not only to ‘the facts,’ such as they are, but also to an inherent ambiguity of the facts that derives from human freedom.”<sup>382</sup> Did female writers in the Ming and Qing dynasties find freedom in their creative work? Did their expression of emotions through *yanqing* allow their spirits to transcend traditional moral constraints? They were not necessarily pioneers, but they did succeed in reducing the tensions between morality, social roles, and intellectual development, exhibiting an impressive dynamism in their works.

This thesis focuses on the transitional and contrasting characteristics from the late Ming to the mid-Qing period, with a particular emphasis on literary content. A point worthy of further reflection is whether there is a distinction between *shi* [poetry] and *ci* in terms of creative approach. Are there different reasons behind the choice of literary forms in Chinese literary history? Moreover, is there a correlation between the geographical distribution of

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<sup>379</sup> Chao Yi (趙怡), “[Early Chinese Films and Movie Stars as Reported in the *Le Journal de Shanghai* in the Shanghai Concessions] 上海租界《法文上海日報》報導的中國早期電影與影星,” in China Gender Studies Association (中国ジェンダー研究会) ed., 中國的娛樂與性別——女性之變 (*Entertainment and Gender in China—The Transformation of Women*) (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2023), 40. *Le Journal de Shanghai* was a newspaper published in the French Concession area of Shanghai, China from 1927 to 1945.

<sup>380</sup> Li Waiyee, *The Promise and Peril of Things: Literature and Material Culture in Late Imperial China*, 19.

<sup>381</sup> Neil Scheurich, “Evolution, Human Enhancement, and the Narrative Self,” *Literature and Medicine* 27, no. 1 (2009): 13. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.0.0018>.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*

authors and their writing styles? Furthermore, did *yanqing* writing continue into the early Republican era, and if so, what differences can be observed between these two time periods?

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the political meaning exhibited in early Republican China's film appreciation: the marginalization of women and illiterate non-mainstream moviegoers, which reflects the phenomenon of the "Ideological State Apparatus."<sup>383</sup> Was there a similar phenomenon in the evaluation of traditional Chinese literature? Control over language equates to control over power. Criticism of *yanqing* literature has inherited political ideologies, reflecting patriarchal, male-dominated values. Although women engaged in *yanqing* writing, the evaluation of such works still could not escape traditional value systems. However, with the increasing prominence of female writing, the shackles of marginalization have gradually loosened. Women were able to express their imaginations of *yan* and *qing* in the literary world, and this sense of freedom was perhaps the beautiful and resilient dance of women in the literary sphere of that era.

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<sup>383</sup> Yoshino Sugawara (菅原慶乃), "[Modern women dressed as men: the film series "The Invisible Girl" and female audiences] 女扮男裝的現代摩登女性——電影《化身姑娘》系列與女性觀眾," in *Entertainment and Gender in China—The Transformation of Women*, 6-7.

**Appendix: List of the Mentioned Women's Works and the Types of Definitions**

	Author (Last name, First name)	Title of Work	Types of Definitions
1	Bai Huan	“Linzhong ji Qiulang” (臨終寄丘郎)	Love
2		“Ji da qiu changru” (寄答丘長孺)	Love
3	Cao Zenxiu	“Ti hengbo furen hua taohua” (題橫波夫人畫桃花)	Love / Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
4	Chen Yuyin	“Ti hua meiren” (題畫美人)	Boudoir Laments / Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
5	Dou Shi	“Erxiong naji oucheng eryong qianyishou zengsao houyishou zengji” (二兄納姬偶成二詠前一首贈嫂後一首贈姬)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
6	Gu Roupu	“Meiren tu” (美人圖)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
7	Gu Zhenli	“Qinyuan chun: Ti meiren jian” (沁園春：題美人牋)	Boudoir Laments
8	Gui Maoyi	“Feng die ling: Ti meiren bian mian” (風蝶令：題美人便面)”	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
9	Jing Pianpian	“Shi suo” (十索)	Love / The depiction of objects and landscapes infused with a sense of romance
10	Liang Yuji	“Fu jiaren xin hun” (賦佳人新婚)	Love / The depiction of objects and landscapes infused with a sense of romance

11	Lu Qingzi	“Zeng feng meiren” (贈馮美人)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
12	Pan Shuzheng	“Tonglu guizhao tuci quanjiang jian chuannu xizuo” (桐廬歸棹途次泉江見船女戲作)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
13		“Nang kian tu: Diao ji xi fen chai” (囊劍圖：調寄惜分釵)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
14	Shang Zilan	“Zui penglai: Duzuo ounian yu wusheng chouxi changyin zhecheng queji” (醉蓬萊：獨坐偶念與吳生疇昔暢飲輒成卻寄)	Love
15	Shen Yixiu	“Dielianhua: Xiaobi xunxiang enuoyouzhi chuchu ru qiutang kelian nianshier ersi chuangran aizhi fuci” (蝶戀花：小婢尋香婀娜有致楚楚如秋棠可憐年十二而死愴然哀之賦此)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
16		“Huanxisha: Shinu suichun pogua shi shanzuo jiaohan zhi tai zhunu yongzhi yu yi xizuo” (浣溪沙：侍女隨春破瓜時善作嬌憨之態諸女詠之余亦戲作)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
15	Shen Zhen	“Wushan yuduan yun: Meiren” (巫山一段雲：美人)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
17	Sun Yunfeng	“Qinyuan chun: Bin” (沁園春：鬢)	The depiction of objects and landscapes infused with a sense of romance /
18		“Qinyun chun: Fenpu (沁園春：粉撲)	
19		“Qinyuan chun: Mei (沁園春：眉)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
20	Sun Yunhe	“Qinyuan chun: Ko (沁園春：口)	The depiction of objects and landscapes infused with a sense of romance /

			Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
21	Wang Wei	“Zui Chunfeng” (醉春風)	Love
22	Wang Yuzhen	“Shengchazi” (生查子)	Love
23		“Nangezi” (南歌子)	
24		“Shengchazi: Ni yan” (生查子：擬艷)	
25	Wu Xiao	“Ti hua shan” (題畫扇)	The depiction of objects and landscapes infused with a sense of romance / Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
26		“Yi hu zhu: Ge ji (一斛珠：歌伎)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
27	Xu Yuan	“Zeng meiren” (贈美人)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
28		“Zeng difu yeniang” (贈弟婦葉娘)	
29	Xue Qiong	“Xiangjian huan: Zeng chui xiao nuzi” (相見歡：贈歛簫女子)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
30	Ye Xiaolun	“Huanxisha: Tong laingzie xizeng mubi suichun” (浣溪沙：同兩姊戲贈母婢隨春)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
31	Ye Wanwan	“Sanzi ling: Yong fenpu” (三字令：詠粉撲)	The depiction of objects and landscapes infused with a sense of romance / Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
32	Yuan Jinrong	“Ti panfuren wangpeizhimei wanshan meiren” (題潘夫人汪佩之妹紈扇美人)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”

33	Zhang Lingyi	“Linjiang xian: Yong meiren fang fengzheng” (臨江僊：詠美人放風箏)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
34		“Tashaxin: Daimei pin se (騰眉顰色)	The depiction of objects and landscapes infused with a sense of romance /
35		“Tashaxin: Jinpen mu fa” (踏莎行：金盆沐髮)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”
36		“Tashaxin: Yue lian yun mian” (月窺勻面)	
37	Zhao Yanru	“Gongsun daniang wujian xingzeng Zhougongxia” (公孫大孃舞劍行贈周公瑕)	The depiction of objects and landscapes infused with a sense of romance
38	Zhong Yun	“Chongdie jin: Meiren xiao zhuang” (重疊金：美人曉粧)	The depiction of objects and landscapes infused with a sense of romance
39	Zhu Rouying	“Huanxisha he liangbolong zeng ji” (浣溪沙·(又)和梁伯龍贈伎)	Allegories in the style of “Fragrant Grass and Beauty”

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