

THE MAKING OF THE EPHEMERAL BEAUTY: ACCEPTANCE
AND REJECTION OF PATRIARCHAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF
HONGYAN BOMING IN LATE-MING TEXTS

by
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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: The Making of the Ephemeral Beauty: Acceptance and Rejection of Patriarchal Constructions of *Hongyan Boming* in Late-Ming Texts

This thesis explores how late-Ming writers interpreted the expression “beauty is ill-fated” (*hongyan boming*) and how male and female writers constructed and accepted the image of the ephemeral beauty (*hongyan*) differently. I argue that late-Ming male literati destigmatized and immortalized *hongyan*, but their interpretations of *hongyan* reinforced male fantasies about women, and served the status quo of the patriarchal family structure as well as the established literary conventions of the time. Female writers, conversely, often rejected the image and idea of *hongyan* and even managed to assert female subjectivity in order to reinterpret the male-constructed *hongyan*. However, ultimately, female writers of the period could not escape from the containment of these patriarchal literary conventions. Even for those female writers who have preserved their voices in their writings, women’s self-expressions have always been undergoing a seemingly infinite process of reinterpretations and reconstructions by male literati.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION: THE DEFINITION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE <i>HONGYAN</i> IN LATE-MING PERIOD.....	1
II. A DESTIGMATIZED AND SOLIPSISTIC OBJECT: TANG XIANZU'S CONSTRUCTION OF <i>HONGYAN</i> IN <i>THE PEONY PAVILION</i>	15
III. THREE COMPETING DISCOURSES: CONSTRUCTION, ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION OF <i>HONGYAN</i> IN <i>WUMENGTANG JI</i>	33
IV. CONCLUSION: THE INFINITE FANTASIES OF WOMEN IN THE OMNIPRESENT MALE GAZE	61
REFERENCES CITED	65

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE DEFINITION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE *HONGYAN* IN LATE-MING PERIOD

The idiom *hongyan boming* 紅顏薄命, which I interpret as “beautiful women are ill-fated”, is widely-known and has been often used from late imperial to contemporary China. However, this idiom is not a late-imperial invention. In fact, the word *hongyan* 紅顏 has gone through a series of semantic transformations. In addition, *hongyan* has not been attached with *boming* nor were these two words adopted as a unified concept until late imperial China. During late imperial period, the interpretations of the word *hongyan* and the idiom *hongyan boming* became even more complicated under the Neo-Confucianism, the discourse of *qing* 情, and heated discussions about women’s talent and morality.¹

In this paper, I primarily consider two late-Ming literary texts, *The Peony Pavilion* 牡丹亭 of Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550-1616) and *Wumengtang ji* 午夢堂集, Ye Shaoyuan 葉紹袁 (1589-1648)’s compilation of his family’s works.² My central concern is the ways in which male and female writers in late-Ming differently interpreted and constructed the concept of *boming hongyan* in the late-Ming period. I argue that in the writings of late Ming period, the word *hongyan* blends the concept of

¹ Neo-Confucianism is a modern, foreign term, and it contains many aspects of the philosophical discussions such as *Li xue* 理學, and *Xin xue* 心學, see Bol, 78. For more discussions On Neo-Confucianism, see Bol, chapter 3. And I will expound on the discourse of *qing* later in this chapter.

² Kang-I Sun Chang has translated it as *Collected Works from the Daydreamer’s Studio* in *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*, 267.

“strange creatures” (*youwu* 尤物) and “beauty” (*meiren* 美人), and *hongyan* is not limited to its literary meaning—vigorous young beauty.³ The word *hongyan* not only refers to beautiful, young women, depending on the context, but also carries with it the connotation of destructive power, the potential of transcendence, and subjectivity of emotions under the discourse of *qing*. However, despite the existence of some subjectivity in the concept of *hongyan*, the constructions of this word and the expression *hongyan boming* prove to be products of the patriarchal system and cannot escape from the patriarchal literary conventions regardless of the gender of the author.

It is apparent that the specific intellectual and cultural background of late-Ming greatly influenced the reconstruction of the concept of *boming hongyan*, however, little research has yet been done on the historical construction of this concept in late-Ming. He Wei 何蔚 discusses in her M.A thesis the acceptance and application of the concept of *hongyan boming* in terms of rhetoric and semantics. She argues that the narrative of *hongyan boming* functions to conceal the inherent paradox between the two words, *hongyan* and *boming*, and to motivate people’s acceptance of and self-identification with the “ephemeral beauty”. But as a linguistic study, her article focuses more on notion of acceptance rather than the historical construction of the idiom.⁴ Yan Zhongliang 嚴忠良 looks into the late imperial Chinese construction of the concept *hongyan boming* in the concept of medical history. He argues that this

³ I will expound on the definitions and interpretations of *youwu* and *meiren* later.

⁴ See He, *Hongyan boming de huayu fenxi*.

concept is a reflection of a historical reality in which women had very limited access to effective medical treatment because of the boundary between the genders. Further, this concept was also a product of a medical history dominated by male authorship and male practitioners.⁵ In literary studies, contemporary scholar Cai Zhuqing 蔡祝青 considers a short novel written by Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680), and argues that the expression *hongyan boming* was a product of the late imperial patriarchal society and thus an embodiment of the misogyny of the period. However, her article is too brief to be able to provide an overview of gender relationships of late-Ming and early Qing period.⁶ Another contemporary scholar Zhong Mingqi 鍾明奇 argues that the concept of *hongyan boming* was under the control of the patriarchal literati and became a method to maintain the social order. However, Zhong only focuses on the writings of Li Yu and fails to extend or connect Li Yu's view to the literary conventions of the time.⁷ Before analyzing the primary texts, I will explore the historical and literary background of the idiom and then incorporate both into my interpretation of the concept of *hongyan*.

Terms Matter: Synonyms of *Hongyan*

⁵ See Yan, "Hongyan boming: nanquan huayu xiade mingqing nüxing yiliao 紅顏薄命：男權話語下的明清女性醫療。"

⁶ See Cai, "Mingqing wenren de xingbieguan——hongyan pian: 'hongyan' yu 'boming' zhijian de fuquan lunshu 明清文人的性別觀—紅顏篇：'紅顏'與'薄命'之間的父權論述。"

⁷ See Zhong, "Lun Li Yu hongyan boming de qingai sixiang 論李漁紅顏薄命的情愛思想。"

To determine the hermeneutic meaning of the concept of *boming hongyan*, I would like to firstly differentiate it from the synonyms *se* 色, *meiren*, and *youwu*.

One of the frequently used synonyms for the word *hongyan* from early to late imperial China was *se*. As a single word, *se* is morally neutral, referring to an external beautiful appearance without connoting specific moral judgment. But when *se* is situated in specific contexts, its meaning is contingent on the contexts and the applications of *se*. Mencius (ca. 372-289 BCE) has written a dialogue between King Qixuan and him, in which we can witness both positive and negative interpretations of *se*:

The King said, "I have an infirmity; I am fond of beauty."
The reply was, "formerly, King Tai was fond of beauty, and loved his wife. it is said in *the Book of Poetry*,
'Ku-kung Tan-fu
Came in the morning, galloping his horse,
By the banks of the western waters,
As far as the foot of Chi hill,
Along with the lady of Chiang;
They came and together chose the site for their settlement.'
At the time, in the seclusion of the house, there were no dissatisfied women, and abroad, there were no unmarried men. If your Majesty loves beauty, let the people be able to gratify the same feeling, and what difficulty will there be in your attaining the royal way?"
王曰：“寡人有疾，寡人好色。”
對曰：“昔者大王好色，愛厥妃。《詩》云：‘古公亶甫，來朝走馬，率西水滸，至於岐下。爰及姜女，聿來胥宇。’當是時也，內無怨女，外無曠夫。王如好色，與百姓同之，於王何有？”⁸

In this confessional speech, the King implies that *se* is destructive for morality and

⁸ See English translation and Chinese text in Legge, "The Works of Mencius." Chapter King Hui of Liang, Part II, 163-164.

desiring beauty (*haose* 好色) goes against the contemporary moral codes governing kingly behaviors. However, Mencius legitimates the *se* in his part of the dialogue. He suggests that the King share his personal desire for *se* with the ordinary people, rather than to keep *se* as a prerogative of the King. In the end, by redefining *haose* as the same as other innate human natures or instincts, Mencius reconciles the subversive power of the King's private desire for *se*. In Mencius's interpretation, desire is understandable, yet its moral legitimacy depends on the King's abstinence and tactical application of it. The excess of desire and the failure to have empathy with people are morally inappropriate, but by weaving personal desire into the web of public interests, sexual desire gains moral legitimacy.

Another frequently used synonym of *hongyan* was *meiren*, which usually refers to transcendent, moral beauty. This usage of *meiren* dates back to *The Song of Chu* 楚辭, for example:

I will wash my hair with you in the Pool of Heaven;
You shall dry your hair on the Bank of Sunlight.
I watch for the Fair One, but he does not come.
Wildly I shout my song into the wind.
與女沐兮鹹池，晞女發兮陽之阿。
望美人兮未來，臨風恍兮浩歌。⁹

The narrator constructs a deity-like beauty who represents the transcendence from mundane world and the narrator's desire for sensual and spiritual fulfillment, and

⁹ See translation in Hawkes, "Chiu Ko (*Jiuge* 九歌)" in *Chu Tzu: The Songs of the South*, 41; Chinese text in Hong, 73.

therefore frames the beauty as the focus of male gaze. Though the narrator does not mention the morality of this beautiful figure, her spiritual transcendence suggests perfect virtue. However, this mysterious deity rarely embodies herself suggesting that the image of the beauty here is more of a projection of the narrator's fantasy and imagination rather than functioning as a realistic depiction: this figure is ephemeral, intangible, unpredictable and always-to-be-chased. In the end, the existence of the deity-like figure entirely depends on the male narrator's gaze and fantasy.

In addition, the quest for the divine *meiren* presents a secular, political, and allegorical dimension when situated in the "herb-beauty" (*xiangcao meiren* 香草美人) discourse. For example, in *On Encountering Sorrow* (*Li sao* 離騷), Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340-278 B.C.) writes: "And I thought how the trees and flowers were fading and falling, And feared that my Fairest's beauty would fade too. 惟草木之零落兮, 恐美人之遲暮。"¹⁰ In *Chuci buzhu* 楚辭補注, Wang Yi 王逸 (89-158) comments that:

Meiren refers to the King Huai. The King wears beautiful clothes, so he is called *meiren*.

美人，謂懷王也。人君服飾美好，故曰美人也。¹¹

As Li Wai-yee argues in *Enchantment and Disenchantment*, "the deity acquires an aura of high seriousness as the 'symbolic other' in the dramatic quest for the

¹⁰ See English translation in Hawkes, "On Encounter Sorrow" in *Chu Tzu: The Songs of the South*, 22; Chinese text in Hong, 6.

¹¹ See Hong, 6. The English translation is by me.

fulfillment of political ideals.”¹² In the “herb-beauty” discourse, *meiren* is not about the beautiful woman but rather serves to foreground the narrator’s fidelity and uncompromising political idealism.

The third and most crucial synonym of *hongyan* was *youwu*, which refers to women who are lacking in morality but possess both extreme sexual attractiveness and destructive power. In one of the most authoritative Chinese dictionaries *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, *you* 尤 means “different/strange” (*yi* 異).¹³ The other word “*wu* 物” means “object” and “creature”. In general, the word *youwu* indicates a public objectifying gaze towards beautiful women. In Glen Dudbridge’s discussion of *The Tale of Li Wa* and *Yingying zhuan*, Dudbridge translates *youwu* as “beautiful creatures”, and also interprets the term as threatening to dynastic integrity because *youwu*’s sexual attractiveness will destruct male’s morality and the whole moral system.¹⁴

One of the famous references of *youwu* is *Yingying Zhuan* 鶯鶯傳, a *chuanqi* story written by a prominent literati Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831) during the mid-Tang dynasty. The *chuanqi* genre also contributed to the construction of the image of *youwu* by affirming the concept that “beautiful creatures” are dangerous and disastrous. The *Yingying Zhuan* depicts a love affair between, Zhang Sheng 张生, a

¹² Wai-ye Li, 6.

¹³ Duan, 747.

¹⁴ Dudbridge, 68-70.

member of literati, and the heroine—a young lady Cui Yingying 崔鶯鶯, whose story does not end in marriage but in abandonment and separation. Near the end of the story, Zhang Sheng expounds on his reason for abandoning Cui Yinying:

All such *creatures* ordained by Heaven to possess *bewitching beauty* will inevitably cast a curse on others if they don't do the same to themselves. Had Cui Ying-ying made a match with someone of wealth and power, she would have taken advantage of those charms that win favor from a man, and if she were not the clouds and the rain of sexual pleasure, then she would have been a serpent or a fierce dragon—I do not know what she would have transformed into. Long ago King Shou-xin of Yin and King You of Zhou controlled domains that mustered a million chariots, and their power was very great. Nevertheless, in both cases a woman destroyed them. Their hosts were scattered, they themselves were slain, and even today their ignominy has made them laughingstocks for all the world. My virtue is inadequate to triumph over such cursed wickedness, and for this reason I hardened my heart against her.

大凡天之所命尤物也，不妖其身，必妖於人。使崔氏子遇合富貴，乘寵嬌，不為雲，不為雨，為蛟為螭，吾不知其所變化矣。昔殷之辛，周之幽，據百萬之國，其勢甚厚。然而一女子敗之，潰其眾，屠其身，至今為天下僂笑。予之德不足以勝妖孽，是用忍情。¹⁵

In this context, the narrator assumes that the “bewitching beauty” *youwu* comes with seductive and dangerous power. From a macrocosmic perspective, her destructive power is enough to endanger the whole country. Zhang Sheng not only deems Yingying as a *youwu*, but also treats their relationship as a battle between his *yang* moral power, and Yingying's *yin* fearful, devastating, evil power. His retreat from the relationship, or his “restraining himself from love” (*ren qing* 忍情), acknowledges his failure as a Confucian scholar engaged in battle with evil beauty, which further

¹⁵ See English translation in Owen, 181; Chinese text in Yuan, 273.

stigmatizes the image of the *youwu*. Dudbridge also claims that by consigning Yingying to the status of an alien predatory creature, Zhang Sheng could take refuge in the secure morality of the canon.¹⁶ In other words, to stigmatize beautiful women as *youwu* underpins the Confucian literati's defense of their moral integrity and the overall morality of the Confucianism.

When it comes to the word *hongyan*, one essential meaning of the term is the vigorous, youthful beauty. For example, in the poem that Li Bai 李白 (701-762) wrote to his good friend Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (689-740), the virile Meng Haoran is depicted as:

In the age of *red color*, he abandons his chariot and formal attire;
In the age of white hair, he sleeps among pine trees and clouds.
紅顏棄軒冕，白首臥松雲。¹⁷

In this couplet, “white head” *baishou* 白首 refers to relaxed and reclusive old age, and the word *hongyan* represents the person of being an energetic young man. This poem celebrates the nobleness and morality of Meng Haoran for his rejection of being restrained by the “chariot and formal attire” (*xuanmian* 軒冕), which indicates an attachment to official service and material life. As this couplet shows, *hongyan* was usually used with *baishou* without any negative connotations before late imperial China.

¹⁶ Dudbridge, 71.

¹⁷ Chinese text in Li Bai, 461. English translation is by me.

By the early Ming, the word *hongyan* started to appear together with *boming*, referring specifically to women of youthful beauty. In the meantime, the expression *hongyan boming* carried the negative connotation that the youthful beauty *hongyan* is the source of disaster and the ill-fate *boming* is the punishment, or result, for being beautiful. For example, the early-Ming poet Li Zhen 李禎 (1376-1452) wrote a poem *Zhizheng jiren xing* 至正妓人行 to an aged prostitute.¹⁸ In this preface to the poem, Li Zhen first introduces the vicissitudes that the prostitute has experienced from the late Yuan to early Ming, and then addresses her as an embodiment of the concept of *hongyan boming*: “Does it mean that the *ill-fated beauty* throughout the history should be like her? 豈來今往古，紅顏薄命，當如是耶！”¹⁹ Although Li Zhen shows his sympathy with the prostitute for being ill-fated, he finally attributes her vicissitudes to her beauty: “The beauty usually becomes the encumbrance for the person’s aptitude. 美貌多為姿質累。”²⁰ In his context, the beauty is stigmatized as a destructive, impedimental factor that leads to her ill-fate.

The negative connotation of the expression of *hongyan boming* is also exemplified in Li Yu’s story *Chou langjun pajiao pian de yan* 醜郎君怕嬌偏得艷.²¹ Even though Li Yu lived after Tang Xianzu and Ye Shaoyuan, his example shows that the cultural power of the trope is too strong to be reversed by the late-Ming literati. In

¹⁸ Zhizheng 至正 is the name of the last era of Yuan dynasty, ranging from 1341 to 1370.

¹⁹ See the poem “Zhizhengjiren xing 至正妓人行” in Li Zhen, vol. 4, 22.a-24.b.

²⁰ Li Zhen, vol. 4, 24.b.

²¹ Li Yu, 5-33.

this story, the protagonist Que Lihou 闕里侯 is a physically disabled and sexually unattractive man, yet he marries three beautiful wives in succession. Due to his obnoxious physical appearance, the first two wives both decide to become a nun to avoid physical contact with him, while the third wife is desperately anticipating her ex-husband scholar Yuan 袁 to remarry her. However, the embodiment of Neo-Confucianism and cultural authority—scholar Yuan, turns down her request and inculcates her with the concept of *hongyan boming*. Yuan claims that the ill fate is the punishment for being beautiful, therefore, these beautiful wives should either be obedient to the husband and bear the punishment of bearing with an unmatched husband, or choose not to fulfill a wife's obligations and receive an ephemeral life as the punishment. In the end, the three wives all accept scholar Yuan's interpretation of the concept of *hongyan boming* and start to comply with the Neo-Confucian principles for women. Through scholar Yuan, Li Yu emphasizes his understanding of the concept of *hongyan boming* as he claims in the beginning of the story:

The old proverb "*Pretty face, sorry fate*" sums up all that needs to be said, but it has to be understood correctly. It does not mean that a woman receives a sorry fate *because* she has a pretty face, but that if she deserves a sorry fate she will be condemned to have a pretty face. A pretty face at birth is thus the sign of a sorry fate, and no such woman will ever obtain a good husband or enjoy a happy life.

古來“紅顏薄命”四個字已說盡了，只是這四個字，也要解得明白：不是因她有了紅顏，然後才薄命；只為她應該薄命，所以才罰做紅顏。但凡生出個紅顏婦人來，就是薄命之坯了，哪裏還有好丈夫到她嫁，好福分

到她享？²²

In Li Zhen's context, he shows sympathy, though limited, for *hongyan* for their lack of agency in determining to be a beauty. However, in Li Yu's context, he removes the sympathy with the beautiful appearance *hongyan* and treats *hongyan* as a retribution and punishment for an immoral and guilty life. Li Yu predetermines the immorality of *hongyan* and makes *hongyan* a completely stigmatized existence.

Historical and Intellectual Background in Late-Ming

In the late Ming, literati's interpretations of the word *hongyan* and the increasing usages of the expression *hongyan boming* were closely connected with the late imperial intellectual and literary context. Before proceeding to analyze the meaning of *hongyan*, it is necessary to introduce the general historical background in the late Ming which gave rise to the discourse of *qing*.

The discourse of *qing* dated back to the Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529) school and Li Zhi's theory of genuineness. Around the sixteenth-century, Wang Yangming proposed the concept of *liangzhi* 良知, which Tang Chun-I translates as original-good-conscientious-knowing.²³ Wang Yangming rejected the idea of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) that the principles of Heaven are the content and nature of our mind, arguing that *liangzhi* is existentially identical with the principles of Heaven and

²² English translation in Hanan, 4; Chinese text in Li Yu, 5-6.

²³ Tang Chun-I, 101.

emphasizing the self-consciousness of *liangzhi* as the original substance of mind.²⁴

Thus it became possible for Wang Yangming to popularize the notion of sagehood by internalizing it. Based on the assumption of a common moral nature of mankind, he encouraged people to manifest the standard of perfection within their own heart and mind rather than relying on external standards. In the end, Wang Yangming's subjective approach motivated individual development and self-expression in the late Ming, and the tide of individualistic thought in late-Ming reached its height with Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602). He celebrated the concept of "Childlike Mind" (*tong xin* 童心), arguing that man's nature is originally pure and one should follow wherever it spontaneously leads.²⁵ Therefore, according to Li Zhi's theory, the spontaneous expression of inner feelings becomes the highest criterion of human relations and human morality.

Apart from the Wang Yangming school and Li Zhi's theory, the Gong-an 公安 school, also known as "School of Innate Sensibility" (*xing-ling pai* 性靈派), in late-Ming period also contributed to the rise of the cult of *qing* in the late-Ming period.²⁶ Yuan Zongdao 袁宗道 (1560-1600) was the founder of the Gong-an school, but his younger brother Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568-1610) played the most

²⁴ Tang Chun-I, 102. On the differences and relations between the theories of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, see Tang Chun-I, 100-108.

²⁵ More information about Li Zhi, see de Bary, "Individualism and Humanitarianism," 188-225; Epstein, 74-79. On Li Zhi's discussion about "genuine heart-mind," see Pauline C. Lee, 114-132. de Bary also discusses Li Zhi's doubt on the criteria of orthodoxy and the ideal of sagehood, see de Bary, "Neo-Confucian Cultivation and 'Enlightenment'," 190-194.

²⁶ The translation of Gong'an school, see Chou, 44.

crucial role in developing this school.²⁷ Yuan Hongyao discouraged emulation and emphasized the importance of individuality and the genuineness of emotion.²⁸

As a friend of Li Zhi and the Yuan brothers, Tang Xianzu was also a leading figure in the literary and intellectual world of his time.²⁹ Moreover, the Ye family, as a famous gentry family in the cultured Jiangnan 江南 area, was in no way beyond the influence of these intellectual trends. In the following chapter, I will focus on Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion* and explore how he constructed and interpreted the concept of *hongyan boming* in the specific literary and intellectual context of his time.

²⁷ On Yuan Zongdao, see Chou 28-35, Qian, 566.

²⁸ On Yuan Hongdao's literary theory, see Chou 35-60.

²⁹ C. T. Hsia discusses about how the intellectual thoughts of Li Zhi and Yuan brothers influenced Tang Xianzu, see Hsia, 249.

CHAPTER II

A DESTIGMATIZED AND SOLIPSISTIC OBJECT: TANG XIANZU'S CONSTRUCTION OF *HONGYAN* IN *THE PEONY PAVILION*

In the late Ming period, the discourse of *qing* played a significant role in shaping the meaning and usage of the concept of *hongyan*. My primary text in this chapter is Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion* (first published in 1598), which is one of the most representative *qing* texts of the late Ming, and I will use it to explore how Tang Xianzu constructed the image of the young, beautiful, and fragile women *hongyan* under the discourse of *qing*. I argue that in Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion*, the image of *boming hongyan*—Du Liniang, is full of solipsistic *qing* and subjectivity. In the discourse of *qing*, the expression of *qing* does not require an object but mainly focuses on the authenticity of emotions delivered by the subject. *Qing*'s existence is not determined or affected by interactions between the subject and the object, but depends completely on the will of the subject. Through recording Liniang's self-depiction and self-identification, Tang Xianzu suggests that Liniang's ultimate goal is solipsistic—to preserve her beauty, the vessel of her subjectivity, through the practice and fulfillment of *qing*.

Although Tang Xianzu presents the subjectivity of *hongyan*—Du Liniang, however, in my reading, the narrative finally reveals that Tang Xianzu intentionally constructs the *hongyan* as an instantiation of his *qing* values, and the *hongyan* is unable to

escape from being an object of the male literary conventions. In order to eternalize Du Liniang's beauty and subjectivity, Tang Xianzu requires her to be recognized, recorded, and circulated by male literati, which inevitably turns her into a gazed-upon object.

Because in both traditional and modern estimation Tang Xianzu is especially praised for his affirmation of *qing*, C.T. Hsia suggests that Tang Xianzu attaches supreme importance to *qing* because *qing* appears to him to be the distinguishing feature of human existence.³⁰ Moreover, I would argue, Tang Xianzu's affirmation of *qing* also applies to his literary theory and writings.³¹ For example, in an introduction to a friend's poem, Tang Xianzu expresses his opinion on *qing*:

(Living in) the world is always for *qing*. *Qing* gives birth to poems and songs, and it runs through the spirit. There is no sound, smiling expression, large or small matter, life and death under the heaven that does not arise from *qing*. Because of *qing*, poems can affect human emotions and make people dance; the sadness presented can thus affect ghost and deity, wind and rain, birds and beasts, sway grass and trees, and shatter gold and stones. The reason that poems are transmitted and preserved is their presentation of the spirit and *qing*, together or separately. If there is neither of the spirit nor *qing*, even if the poems are said to be transmitted, the world will not allow it.

世總為情，情生詩歌，而行於神。天下之聲音笑貌大小生死，不出乎是。因以澹蕩人意，歡樂舞蹈，悲壯哀感鬼神風雨鳥獸，搖動草木，洞裂金石。其詩之傳者，神情合至，或一至焉；一無所至，而必曰傳者，亦世所不許也。³²

³⁰ See Hsia, 250.

³¹ On Tang Xianzu's theory of *qing*, see Hua, 1-9.

³² See Tang Xianzu, *The Introduction to Erbo's Magu you shi* 耳伯《麻姑遊詩》序, in *Tang Xianzu quanji*, 1110-1111.

From Tang Xianzu's perspective, *qing* is the ultimate desire in life and the key that sustains life and secures the transmission of poetry. In this text, Tang Xianzu claimed that "*qing* gives birth to poems and songs," which borrows the idea of "poetry expresses one's aspiration (*shi yan zhi* 詩言志)" from the *The Great Preface* (*daxu* 大序) from *The Book of Poetry* (*Shi jing* 詩經).³³ Through treating moral nature and human nature as being inherent in and continuous with *qing*, Tang Xianzu manages to legitimate his celebration of *qing*, which becomes the overarching morality in his writings.

Despite the variable hermeneutic meanings of the word *hongyan* as I discussed in last chapter, the publication and popularization of *The Peony Pavilion* 牡丹亭 stabilized the discourse of *qing* and thus the interpretation of the word *hongyan* in late-Ming texts. Many scholars and records have demonstrated *The Peony Pavilion's* popularity and its power in arousing the cult of *qing*. Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578-1642) once mentioned its immediate success on the book market: "Once *The Peony Pavilion* was published, every household was circulating and singing it, almost undercutting the price of *The Story of the West Wing*. 《牡丹亭》一出，家傳戶誦，幾令《西廂》

³³ For the context of "*shiyang zhi* 詩言志", see Legee's translation of *The Great Preface* in Legge, *The Book of Poetry*, Appendix I, 34. "Poetry is the product of earnest thought. Though [cherished] in the mind becomes earnest; exhibited in words, it becomes poetry. The feelings move inwardly, and are embodied in words. When words are insufficient for them, recourse is had to sighs and exclamations are insufficient for them, recourse is had to the prolonged utterances of song. When the prolonged utterances of song are insufficient for them, unconsciously the hands begin to move and the feet to dance. 詩者，志之所之也，在心為志，發言為詩。情動於中而形於言，言之不足，故嗟嘆之，嗟嘆之不足，故永歌之，永歌之不足，不知手之舞之足之蹈之也。"

減價。”³⁴ Dorothy Ko also comments that “the popularity of the drama among women reached legendary proportions.....no other work of literature triggered such an outpouring of emotion from women.”³⁵ Judith Zeitlin also demonstrates that *The Peony Pavilion* repeatedly found discerning and sympathetic readers who intensely identified with Du Liniang.³⁶ To examine how Tang Xianzu construct the image of youthful and fragile beauty *hongyan* under the discourse of *qing*, it is required to pay closer scrutiny to *The Peony Pavilion*.

The Peony Pavilion presented a heroine Du Liniang 杜麗娘 who is young, pretty, high-bred, and most importantly, full of *qing*. She is educated to be a gentle, meek, and virtuous lady, as the Neo-Confucian rituals require. However, after wandering around the backyard garden on a spring afternoon, she has a dream in which she meets, falls in love with, and has sex with a young scholar named Liu Mengmei. After waking up, Liniang’s lovesickness finally leads her to death. Before death, she completes her self-portrait and entrusts it to her servant and parents, and it is later found and treasured by Liu. Through the portrait, Liniang’s ghost returns from the underworld to have a passionate affair with Liu. Upon learning her lovesickness and the following death, Liu disinters her body and brings the girl back to life.

Though obstacles intervene, all parties eventually come together, and the book ends

³⁴ See Shen Defu, 5.

³⁵ See Ko, 73.

³⁶ See Zeitlin, 128. On the cult of *qing* among the readers of *The Peony Pavilion*, see Zeitlin, 127-179.

with a happy reunion.

As I mentioned in the last chapter, there are few studies of the historical construction of the image of youthful, fragile beauty *hongyan* in late imperial China. In this chapter, I will explore how Tang Xianzu constructs the ephemeral beauty *boming hongyan*—Du Liniang under the discourse of *qing*, and how his construction is finally contained by the patriarchal literary conventions.

De-stigmatization and Transgression: *Hongyan* as the Instantiation of *Qing*

In *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu constructs a *hongyan* of solipsist *qing* and therefore presents a destigmatized, feminine youthful beauty *hongyan*. By attaching the overarching morality—*qing* with the *hongyan* figure Du Liniang, he removes negative connotation of sexual attractiveness from the image of the feminine beauty *hongyan* and situates *hongyan* as the overarching morality in his value system.

In *The Peony Pavilion*, Liniang is twice directly addressed as *hongyan*, by herself and by her mother Lady Zhen. In both scenes, the speakers are willing to identify Liniang with the ephemeral beauty *hongyan*. The first one is in Act 16, when Lady Zhen is missing her daughter:

Truly, “*hard is the lot of beauty*”
And drear the prospect for parents soon to be left childless!
(She weeps) Jewel in my palm, flesh of my inmost heart,
Silent pearls of tears I shed for you.
Ah Heaven, when others can be surrounded by seven sons,

Why must a solitary daughter sicken and pine?

偏則是紅顏薄命，
眼見的孤苦仃傳。
(泣介)掌上珍，心頭肉，
淚珠兒暗傾。
天呵，偏人家七子團圓，
一箇女孩兒廝病。³⁷

Through Lady Zhen's eyes, Tang Xianzu emphasizes the de-stigmatization of the *hongyan* as a feminine beauty. In Lady Zhen's narrative, *hongyan* is young, beautiful, cherished, fragile, and unthreatening. As a representative of the microcosmic Neo-Confucian society, Lady Zhen through her sympathy and longing for Liniang, reflects how the macrocosmic society perceives, identifies and judges the *hongyan* as a fragile, feminine beauty. Moreover, unhealthiness is common in depictions of late imperial Chinese women. As the historian Charlotte Furth has shown in her work on the medical understandings of women in China during the period from 1600 to 1850, females were characterized as the "sickly sex," particularly vulnerable to blood loss and bodily depletion. In this context, Lady Zhen does not hesitate to define her beloved daughter as an ephemeral beauty—*boming hongyan* without mentioning any of Liniang's dangerous potential except her fragility. Therefore, the mother's definition of Liniang is more of a reflection of contemporary medical understanding rather than an implication of any moral defect caused by Liniang's sexual attractiveness.

³⁷ See English translation in Birch, 75; Chinese text in Tang Xianzu, *Mudan ting*, 71.

The other scene in which the word *hongyan* is used is Act 14, after looking in the mirror, Liniang intends to paint a self-portrait:

These peach-bloom cheeks of youth
so swiftly with lines of care!
Surely a happy lot is beyond my deserving
--or why must “*fairest face* be first to age”?
Many the beauty has been praised as peerless
Only for time to erase the bright vision—so soon.
這些時把少年人如花貌，
不多時憔悴了。
不因他福份難銷，
可甚的紅顏易老？
論人間絕色偏不少，
等把風光丟抹早。³⁸

Tang Xianzu constructs a de-stigmatized *hongyan*, which Du Liniang is willing to identify with and preserve. In this context, *hongyan* indicates youthful beauty but also comes with the connotation of ephemerality (*yilao* 易老), therefore, Liniang has to reject the term *hongyan* as defining her current status and attributes *hongyan* as specifically youthful beauty to her past—she used to occupy *hongyan* but has already lost it. However, as a sixteen-year-old unmarried lady, she is far from being old. The only reason that she feels self-pity and connects herself with decrepitude is her sudden realization of her gaunt appearance. Even so, Tang Xianzu does not let her submit to this gradual, growing decrepitude and accept the concept of “beauty is easily aged” (*hongyan yilao* 紅顏易老), but allows her to fight against this concept

³⁸ See English translation in Birch, 68; Chinese text in Tang Xianzu, *Mudan ting*, 64.

and the gradual vanishing of beauty by reviving her previous aestheticized appearance through her self-portrait.

The example discussed above proves that the physically appealing *hongyan* is no longer a moral taboo for women in Tang Xianzu's context, but to understand how Tang Xianzu destigmatizes the feminine and fragile *hongyan*, it is necessary to explore how he attaches the solipsist *qing* to the heroine. Although Liniang and Liu Mengmei are both central characters in the romance, there is no doubt that Tang Xianzu chooses the *hongyan*—Du Liniang as the exclusive carrier of *qing*. As the preface of *The Peony Pavilion* writes,

Has the world ever seen a woman's love to rival that of Bridal Du? Dreaming of a lover she fell sick; once sick she became even worse; and finally, after painting her own portrait as a legacy to the world, she died. Dead for three years, still she was able to live again when in the dark underworld her quest for the object of her dream was fulfilled. To be as Bridal Du is truly to have known love. Love is of source unknown, yet it grows ever deeper. The living may die of it, by its power the dead live again. Love is not love at its fullest if one who lives it unwilling to die for it, or if it cannot restore to life one who has so died.

天下女子有情，甯有如杜麗娘者乎！夢其人即病，病即彌連，至手畫形容，傳於世而後死。死三年矣，復能溟莫中求得其所夢者而生。如麗娘者，乃可謂之有情人耳。情不知所起，一往而深。生者可以死，死可以生。生而不可與死，死而不可復生者，皆非情之至也。³⁹

In this context, Tang Xianzu celebrates Du Liniang as a full-of-*qing hongyan* who rejects the Neo-Confucian moral conventions for women in pursuit of *qing*.

³⁹ See English translation in Birch, ix; Chinese text in Tang Xianzu, *Mudan ting*, 1.

According to the Confucian didactic book *Lessons For Women* (*Nüjie* 女誡), women are supposed to stay within the inner *nei* 內 space, while expressing their emotion and desires has always been a taboo.⁴⁰

If, in all her actions, she is frivolous, she sees and hears only that which pleases herself. At home her hair is disheveled and her dress is slovenly. Outside the home she emphasizes her femininity to attract attention; she says what ought not to be said; and she looks at what ought not to be seen. If a woman does such as these, she may be said to be without wholehearted devotion and correct manners.

若夫動靜輕脫，視聽陟輪，入則亂發壞形，出則窈窕作態，說所不當道，觀所不當視，此謂不能專心正色矣。⁴¹

The exact contrast between the Neo-Confucian moral codes and Liniang's emancipation of her authentic emotions and subsequent rejection of imposed moral rules indicates that in Tang Xianzu's value system, Liniang is the best embodiment of the supreme morality—*qing*. As the preface shows, Du Liniang's transgression in the dream has already broken with the moral rules that govern female behavior. In pursuit of the beloved male scholar who appears in her dream, Liniang transcends the temporal, dimensional, life-death boundaries with an agency that sharply challenges Neo-Confucian rules for women.

Tang Xianzu's attitude towards Liu Mengmei further demonstrates why he entrusts all the *qing* to Du Liniang. Tang Xianzu neglects the role of Liu Mengmei in

⁴⁰ In Chinese context, spaces can be divided into *nei* 內 and *wai* 外, but *nei* and *wai* are not equal to domestic and public. *Nei* refers to selfish, morally problematic, illegitimate, threatening, personal, and *nei* space usually refers to women's quarters. *Wai* is on the opposite to *nei* and *wai* space is the microcosm of the public institution.

⁴¹ See English translation in Swann, 325; Chinese text in Ban, 11.

the preface and leaves him underdeveloped in the narrative of *qing* because of Liu Mengmei's less transgressive characteristics. Presented as a male complying with the normal expectations for elite men, Liu can hardly present passion, transgressive behaviors and destabilizing power to the degree that Liniang embodies them. He goes to the imperial examination, tries to seek after an official title, and successfully becomes the first-place. Even though his affair and engagement with Liniang do not strictly comply with Confucian principles, which require "the orders of their parents, and the arrangements of the go-betweens (*fumu zhi ming, meishuo zhi yan* 父母之命, 媒妁之言)," Liu Mengmei's route hardly deviates from the Confucian principles.⁴² And in the end, he still needs to obtain the emperor's authoritative recognition to legitimate his marriage with Liniang.

Moreover, Liu Mengmei's world is always dominated by the regulative and orderly *yang* 陽, which makes him stay in the *wai* 外 space and has him operate well within sanctioned behaviors.⁴³ On the contrary, women (especially the unmarried girls who have never stepped across the architectural inner/outer boundary) are physically confined to the *nei* space, which is full of potentially unstable and destructive *yin*. In the fictional representation, compared to men in the *wai* space, women are more inclined to resist and break established principles.

⁴² "If the young people, without waiting for the orders of their parents, and the arrangements of the go-betweens, shall bore holes to steal a sight of each other, or get over the wall to be with each other, then their parents and all other people will despise them. 不待父母之命, 媒妁之言, 鑽穴隙相窺, 踰牆相從, 則父母國人皆賤之。 See Legge, *The Works of Mencius*, Chapter Tang Wan Kung, Part II, 268.

⁴³ See note 36 for definition of *wai*.

Du Liniang's transcendence of physical restrictions becomes another demonstration of the subjectivity of the *hongyan* as physically fragile yet spiritually full-of-*qing* in transgressing the moral rules. The first restriction which Du Liniang is facing is the boundary between her boudoir and the backyard garden. After walking out of her boudoir and seeing the scenery in the garden, Liniang says:

My mother and father have never spoken of any such exquisite spot as this.
恁般景致，我老爺和奶奶再不提起。⁴⁴

They were all telling the truth, those poems and ballads I read that spoke of girls of ancient times 'in springtime moved to passion, in autumn to regret'.
常觀詩詞樂府，古之女子，因春感情，遇秋成恨，誠不謬矣。⁴⁵

Du Liniang's parents artificially set this restriction hoping to keep her within the boundary of Neo-Confucian morality, however, this boundary turns out to be the impetus for Liniang's erotic dream. Apparently, Liniang's vigilant parents have previously realized the paradoxical existence of the garden. Because the geographical location of the backyard garden determines that it belongs to the *nei* space, the garden is supposed to provide containment for Liniang, such as the walls protecting her from outside gaze.⁴⁶ However, the backyard garden not only fails to display its function of containment, but even appears as a grey zone, blurring the boundaries between inside

⁴⁴ See English translation in Birch, 44; Chinese text in Tang Xianzu, *Mudan ting*, 43.

⁴⁵ See English translation in Birch, 46; Chinese text in Tang Xianzu, *Mudan ting*, 44.

⁴⁶ In McMahon's use of the word "containment," it stands for the ideology of the control of the desire and containing aspects of physical things, especially for the physical containing aspects of physical things such as walls, which are omnipresent props both in real and fictional Chinese landscapes. See McMahon, 2.

and outside. The lack of a covering roof of the garden provides an interstice between the *nei* and *wai* space, breaking the physical objective containment while foregrounding the collapse of Liniang's ethical containment—the mind.⁴⁷ Although her parents are objective towards Liniang's entering the dangerous garden, the existence of the interstice makes it possible for provocative spring scenery to enter the garden, to arouse Liniang's sentiments, and to usher in the stranger Liu Mengmei and give him the opportunity to gaze at and encounter with Liniang. In the end, Du Liniang's successful transgression of her patriarchal parents' orders and the Neo-Confucian moral codes present a physically fragile *hongyan* with strong subjectivity and powerful *qing*.

Self-Gaze: The *Hongyan* Beauty with Solipsistic *Qing*

Through depicting Liniang's gaze into the mirror and painting self-portrait, Tang Xianzu presents a *hongyan* character of aestheticized self-consciousness and solipsistic *qing*. Since painting is a process of reconstruction, through the mirror and the self-portrait, readers are able to observe Du Liniang's self-perception. The first scene when Liniang gazes at her reflection in the mirror is before entering the backyard garden, in Act 10:

⁴⁷ According to McMahon's explanation, subjectivity containers refer to private experience from within, and objective containers refer to walls and rooms and could include mind and body. In Liniang's case, though she has not shown obvious consciousness of self-containment, her desire burst out once there is an interstice, so I would consider her mind as a subjective, ethical containment imposed by Confucian family and ritual principles. See McMahon, 10.

See now how vivid shows my madder skirt,
 How brilliant gleam these combs all set with gems—you see, it has been
 always in my nature to love fine things.
 And yet, this bloom of springtime no eye has seen.
 What if my beauty should amaze the birds
 and out of shame for the comparison
 “cause fish to sink, wild geese to fall to earth,
 petals to close, the moon to hide her face”
 while all the flowers tremble?
 你道翠生生出落的裙衫兒茜，
 豔晶晶花簪八寶填，可知我常一生兒愛好是天然。
 恰三春好處無人見。
 不提防沉魚落雁鳥驚諠，
 則怕的羞花閉月花愁顫。⁴⁸

The first two lines depict Du Liniang’s self-cognition and positive body image, and the next two lines express her appreciation of the aesthetic beauty of her appearance and the natural scene. While gazing at herself, Liniang does not cover her pride in her attractive appearance or her regret for not being free to exhibit her beauty to any audience during the provocative and aesthetic springtime.

Tina Lu argues that mirrors grant people two possibilities: to look on oneself as others might, but also to look at oneself as if one were another. In Act 10, Liniang’s gaze at herself in the mirror confirms the perfect fit between the person inside and how she appears. In Act 14, before painting herself, Liniang’s gaze at herself in the mirror marks a moment of estrangement as the reflection does not meet with her

⁴⁸ See English translation in Birch, 44; Chinese text in Tang Xianzu, *Mudan ting*, 43.

expectation.⁴⁹ It does not necessarily reflect reality, but it does provide insights into the author/painter's thoughts of shaping objects. In Act 14, to fix the rupture between the reflection in the mirror and her ideal self, Liniang paints a self-portrait:

Let me see in the mirror what has really happened. (She looks in the mirror and sobs) Alas, when before I could boast of an enticing soft fullness, how could I have grown as thin and frail as this? Before it's too late let me make a portrait of myself to leave to the world, lest the worst should suddenly befall me and no one then ever learn of the beauty of Bridal Du who came from far Sichuan!

哎也，俺往日豔冶輕盈，奈何一瘦至此！若不趁此時自行描畫，流在人間，一旦無常，誰知西蜀杜麗娘有如此之美貌乎！⁵⁰

According to Liniang's words, it is the "boast of an enticing soft fullness" (*yanye qingying* 豔冶輕盈) appearance that represents her identity and is worthy of being preserved. Informed of her approaching mortality, her most urgent concern is not the absence of a mate but the vanishing of her beauty. In this text, even though the self-portrait does not reflect her current state, she considers it to be a representation of her essence.

In Act 10 and 14, Tang Xianzu constructs a *hongyan* character who is full of solipsistic *qing* by letting Du Liniang focus on eternalizing her beauty and asserting her self-identification through painting. After realizing her beauty through the mirror, Du Liniang exerts her aesthetic beauty and gaze internally to enchant herself rather than wielding it externally as sexual capital to attract others or to gain any worldly

⁴⁹ Lu, 32.

⁵⁰ See English translation in Birch, 67; Chinese text in Tang Xianzu, *Mudan ting*, 63.

interest. Obsessed with documenting her beauty, Liniang's *qing* is more directed towards herself than the hero Liu Mengmei. To unite with Liu is not the ultimate purpose but the route towards the realization of her autonomy; even her death becomes evidence of her uncompromised determination in transcending boundaries rather than a physical defect or tragedy.

However, though Tang Xianzu essentializes Liniang's aesthetic and attractive beauty, he still understates it by turning it into the embodiment of Liniang's subjectivity and solipsistic mind. As Zito argues, in pre-modern China, the body was treated as a sign or vessel upon which meaning was projected, thus physical biology is overridden by social practice in determining a person's social role and behavior.⁵¹ Therefore, Du Liniang's self-descriptions are not mere depictions of the material body but more about metaphysical self-perception and emotion. Liniang's consciousness of her sexually attractive appearance, her desire to exhibit her beauty to the audience, and her rejection of Confucianism are not means for fulfilling her material desire but rather for presenting her self-identification: an aestheticized *hongyan* endowed with subjectivity, self-consciousness and solipsist *qing*.⁵²

Male Gaze: The Route towards Eternity

⁵¹ Zito, 104.

⁵² Epstein has demonstrated that in Li Zhi's view, desire is also the motivation for achieving enlightenment. See Epstein, 78.

In Tang Xianzu's *qing* values, *qing* is the key which allows poems to be transmitted, preserved and eternalized. In turn, that a poem achieves transcendence becomes a demonstration of the genuineness of *qing*. At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Tang Xianzu: "The reason that poems are transmitted and preserved is their presentation of the spirit and *qing*, together or separately. If there is neither of the spirit nor *qing*, even if the poems are said to be transmitted, the world will not allow it. 其詩之傳者，神情合至，或一至焉；一無所至，而必曰傳者，亦世所不許也。"⁵³ From his perspective, the preservation and transmission of poems do not depend on the existence of physical copies but whether the poems can arouse empathy. Once the *qing* within the poems evokes audiences' natural emotions, they will be automatically transmitted.

Since Du Liniang is an instantiation of Tang Xianzu's *qing* values, Tang Xianzu lets her exhibit the consciousness of preserving her *qing* through achieving literary immortality. However, elite males like Tang Xianzu innately had far more opportunities to achieve immortality than women confined to the boudoir because men enjoyed more freedom in recording and transmitting their words and minds, and had more access to the patriarchal literary world. Since Liniang is faced with physical restraints, especially since she is an unhealthy and ephemeral *hongyan*, there is an innate disparity between the mortal embodiment of *qing*—*hongyan*, and the eternal

⁵³ See Tang Xianzu, *The Introduction to Erbo's Magu you shi* 耳伯《麻姑遊詩》序, in *Tang Xianzu quanji*, 1110-1111.

qing itself. In order to fix the disparity—to achieve eternity and preserve her *qing*, Tang Xianzu let Liniang exhibit subjectivity in preserving her appearance through painting her own image.

Nonetheless, during the process of her self-representation, Tang Xianzu inevitably projects his male gaze onto Du Liniang because her immortality requires male literati to recognize and transmit the value of her image. Consequently, on the one hand, she becomes the gazer and painter of herself; on the other hand, entering the patriarchal system of immortality means that Liniang will always be subject to the gaze and appropriation of male literati.

The projection of a male gaze places Du Liniang under risk of being contained by patriarchal literary conventions and made her subjectivity contingent. Zito notes in the article "Silk and Skin: Significant Boundaries" that writing is a practice that produces specific and powerful embodied subjectivities by creating charged sites for their coming into being.⁵⁴ Painting is analogous to writing. Once recorded on paper, Liniang's youthful *hongyan* image is no longer a feature for her personal appreciation of her physical beauty, but instead an origin for the external reinterpretations of her subjectivity. As long as her beauty exists in the gazer's memories and is transmitted by them, it will attain transcendence despite the death of her material body, but at the expense of her voice and subjectivity.

⁵⁴ Zito, 107.

In *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu tears down the stigmatized idiom of *hongyan boming* by celebrating the *hongyan* as a representation of the heroine's transgressive subjectivity, self-consciousness, solipsistic, and eternal *qing*. Under the discourse of *qing* in late-Ming, he gives the fragile and beautiful *hongyan* subjectivity in transgressing Confucian moral codes, expressing solipsistic emotions, and exhibiting a desire for immortality. However, Tang Xianzu's construction of the physically fragile, beautiful, and full-of-*qing* *hongyan* still could not distance itself from the patriarchal literary world, but instead achieves transcendence precisely by becoming a subject of a male gaze and male fascination.

CHAPTER III

THREE COMPETING DISCOURSES: CONSTRUCTION, ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION OF *HONGYAN* IN *WUMENGTANG JI*

In this chapter, I will explore how one talented and beautiful female poet in the late-Ming period, Ye Xiaoluan 葉小鸞 (1616-1632) conceived of and constructed herself while rejecting the definition of the word *hongyan* as an immortal and an integration of virtue, talent, and beauty. Also, I will also demonstrate how her cultured parents interpreted and adopted the concept of *hongyan* differently in their writings about Ye Xiaoluan. In the textual moments where Xiaoluan rejects other's definition of her as a physically appealing *hongyan*, her attitude will provide us a new female perspective to aid in understanding this concept. My argument is that late-Ming male literati and patriarchal parents like Ye Shaoyuan used the concept of *boming hongyan* not as a morally stigmatized image but as an embodiment of their fantasies of the ideal women: an integration of physical, moral and intellectual characteristics. They regarded beauty as being rewarded with immortality rather than being punished with early death. Despite the positive interpretation of the set phrase *boming hongyan*, female writers of the period rejected to use the *hongyan* as morally defected, beautiful women or as immortalized, talented, moral beauty. In addition, they tried to record their subjective voices concerning themselves and other women, though their voices

risked being reinterpreted by male literati. Nevertheless, as long as those women participated in the patriarchal system, it was hard for them to wholly or successfully escape from the patriarchal literary conventions. But by distancing themselves from the patriarchal literary world, there was also an opportunity for women of the period to preserve their own voices.

Ye Xiaoluan has been a source of fascination in literary studies of the late-Ming period due to her exceptional literary talent, ephemeral life, and mysterious death. When she was only six months old her uncle Shen Zizheng 沈自徵 (1591–1641) and aunt Zhang Qianqian 張倩倩 (1594–1627) adopted her because her mother was unable to nurse her. When she was around eleven years old, she returned to her natal family. Soon, her parents engaged her to a literatus Zhang Liping 張立平. She was able to recite many poems from the age of four. When she was thirteen, she was already famous for her poems and lyrics. Despite her promising future, she suddenly died, only five days before her wedding. Afterwards, her family members and other literati frequently mentioned her sudden death in their essays and tried to construct her death as an act of transcendence. For example, Niu Xiu 鈕琇 (?-1704) reconstructed Xiaoluan's death as a fictional story of immortalization, and later on, when Wang Chang 王昶 (1725-1806) was compiling *Ming ci zong* 明詞綜, he also included this story in this collection.⁵⁵ Qian Qianyi included Xiaoluan's poems and

⁵⁵ Zhang, 49.

biography in his anthology of Ming poetry *Liechao shiji xiaozhuan* 列朝詩集小傳.⁵⁶

Many talented women writers imitated Xiaoluan's poems and even included

Xiaoluan's works in their anthologies of women's writings, for example, Wang

Duanshu 王端淑 (1621-1706) included Xiaoluan in her anthology of women

poets—*Classic Poetry by Famous Women (Mingyuan shiwei* 名媛詩緯).⁵⁷

The primary text I use in this chapter is the *Wumengtang ji* 午梦堂集, translated as *Collected Works from the Daydreamer's Studio*, which commemorates a series of deaths in the Ye family. Daydreamer's Studio (*wumeng tang* 午梦堂) was the name of the main hall of Ye Shaoyuan's family, situated in Wujiang 吳江 county. Ye Xiaoluan's parents—Ye Shaoyuan and Shen Yixiu 沈宜修 (1590-1635) both came from distinguished gentry families in Wujiang. Their families arranged their marriage, matching the couple because of their shared interests in poetry, collecting books, and Buddhism.⁵⁸ Ye Shaoyuan and Shen Yixiu had five sons and four daughters and educated them at home. Before an unfortunate series of accidental deaths in the family, the Ye family enjoyed a cultured and comfortable life though they were not excessively wealthy. By 1635, Ye Shaoyuan was suffering from the successive deaths of his third daughter Ye Xiaoluan, his oldest daughter Ye Wanwan 葉紈紈 (1610-1632), his mother Lady Feng 馮氏, his wife Shen Yixiu, his second son Ye

⁵⁶ Qian, 755-756.

⁵⁷ Wang Duanshu, 11.13b-11.14b.

⁵⁸ On Ye Shaoyuan and Shen Yixiu's natal families, see Ko, 187-194.

Shicheng 葉世偁 (1618-1635), his eighth son Ye Shixiang 葉世襄 (1631-1635).

Immersed in deep grief, Ye Shaoyuan decided to collect, compile, and publish all the works and memorial essays of his family members, titling the volume *Wumengtang ji*.

I follow the classification of Li Xuyu 李栩鈺 and divide this collection into three sections.⁵⁹

1. Writings by the Ye women: *Lichui ji* 鸚吹集 and a collection of contemporary women's writings *Yiren si* 伊人思 by Shen Yixiu; *Chouyan* 愁言 by Ye Wanwan; *Yuanyang meng* 鴛鴦夢 and *Cunyu cao* 存餘草 by Ye Xiaowan 葉小紈 (1613-1657); *Fansheng xiang* 返生香 by Ye Xiaoluan.⁶⁰
2. Memorial essays of Ye family members and other relatives: *Qiyuan ai* 岷雁哀, *Tonglian xuxie* 彤畚續些, Ye Shaoyuan's *Qinzhai yuan* 秦齋怨, *Qie wen* 竊聞, *Xu qie wen* 續竊聞, and *Qionghua jing* 瓊花鏡.
3. Works by the deceased sons: *Baimin yicao* 百旻遺草 by Ye Shicheng, *Linghu ji* 靈護集 by Ye Shirong 葉世俗 (1619-1640).

My project focuses on texts from Xiaoluan's collection *Fansheng xiang* and memorial writings about Ye Xiaoluan written by family members.⁶¹ I will also refer to Ye

Shaoyuan's *Qie wen* and *Xu qie wen*, as both works record his fantasies about

⁵⁹ Li Xuyu, 33-46.

⁶⁰ Because Ye Xiaowan and Ye Shirong then were still alive, their works were not included in the first edition of the *Wumengtang ji*, but they were included in later editions. See Li Xuyu, 45.

⁶¹ The name of Ye Xiaoluan's collection was given by Ye Shaoyuan after her death. See the preface to *Fansheng xiang*, in *Wumengtang ji*, 362.

Xiaoluan's afterlife as an immortal and his attempts to reach the goddess Xiaoluan through Daoist seances.

Only recently has there been significant researches on public constructions of Xiaoluan in the writings of family members and Xiaoluan's self-construction in her own writings. But no one has yet focused upon the concept of *hongyan boming* and the accompanying patriarchal literary conventions as a means for explaining these self-constructions. Dorothy Ko points out Xiaoluan's sympathetic identification with Du Liniang in Xiaoluan's appreciation of her own natural physical beauty.⁶² Ko also notes that Ye Shaoyuan complimented Xiaoluan's beauty, but she does not consider beauty to be a significant element in his construction of Xiaoluan. In contrast, she suggests that Xiaoluan's *talent* is the central feature that leads people to construct her as a domestic goddess, as the custodian of secular and mystical knowledge.⁶³

Similarly, in his M.A. thesis, Zhang Qinghe does not consider Xiaoluan's beauty to be an essential factor in her immature death, and argues that the construction of Xiaoluan as a goddess originates from the concept that "talented women are ill-fated (*cainü boming* 才女薄命).⁶⁴ To understand these interpretations of Xiaoluan's death under the lens of literary history, Zhang claims that Xiaoluan's image as a goddess proves to

⁶² Ko, 168.

⁶³ Ko, 202.

⁶⁴ Zhang, 55.

be a contemporary male literati's fantasy and is a demonstration of the cult of *qing*.⁶⁵ However, Zhang does not probe into the gender dynamics underlying the literary trends of late-Ming. Anne Gerritsen discusses the ways in which literati transmitted Xiaoluan's works through the late imperial period, and she argues that the ideals and representations of literati largely shape Xiaoluan's legacy, and the various images of Xiaoluan suggest that her poetry is rarely central to her reception.⁶⁶ Though Gerritsen makes a convincing argument that late-Ming literati wrote Xiaoluan into an icon of *qing*, an immortal goddess, a symbol of late-Ming sensibilities, and as an illustrious member of the Ye family, she fails to look into the involvement of women's writing in shaping Xiaoluan. My contribution to the existing research is to take into consideration the writings of women, especially those of Shen Yixiu and Ye Xiaoluan, to explore how Shen Yixiu present Xiaoluan from a female perspective and how Xiaoluan conceives herself. Also, I will bring in the literary conventions of *boming hongyan* to explain why not only talent but also beauty matters in the various constructions of Xiaoluan.

Father's Voice: Male's Interpretation of the Ephemeral Beauty (*boming hongyan*)

In his writings of Ye Xiaoluan, her father, the literatus Ye Shaoyuan presents her

⁶⁵ Zhang, 49.

⁶⁶ Gerritsen, 38.

as a *hongyan*—a perfect integration of Confucian virtue, literary talent, and physical beauty. His presentation of Xiaoluan is largely influenced by his patriarchal fantasies of the ideal women.

Before examining his construction of Ye Xiaoluan, it is first necessary to look into Ye Shaoyuan's concept of the "Three Transcendent Qualities of Women" (*Nizi san buxiu* 女子三不朽), which plays a significant role in shaping the concept of ideal womanhood in Ye Shaoyuan's eyes. In 1636, Ye Shaoyuan wrote the preface to the *Wumengtang ji* after the deaths of Ye Xiaoluan and Shen Yixiu. In the preface, he expounds on the formation and meaning of the "Three Transcendent Qualities of Women", which refers to women's virtues (*de* 德), literary talent (*cai* 才) and physical beauty (*se* 色):

Men have three things that do not decay: to establish [an example of] virtue, successful service and [wise] speech, while women also have three qualities that do not decay: virtue, talent, and beauty. These concepts have lasted for a long time.....Since Xun Fengqian became depressed and died [serving his wife], indulged himself in *qing*, later on, the Confucians were obsessed with finding fault with him and criticizing him for obscenity. Therefore, the women's beauty was left aside and unmentioned, while the speech of those beautiful women, became a taboo for those Confucians.....so from then on, beautiful appearances were unmentioned, one leg of the *ding* broke while talent and virtue were celebrated simultaneously under the heaven.

...Since it is hard for talent to be discussed, the beauty became a taboo, and since the literati were unwilling to let the women in their families vanish, they then had to substitute women's virtue for the talent and the beauty.....but to demonstrate their virtue is not as reliable as to assess their talent.

丈夫有三不朽，立德立功立言，而婦人亦有三焉，德也，才與色也，幾昭昭乎鼎千古矣…及乎奉倩傷神，矯情綺重，後世儒者，又必欲摘其偏

繆，訾其淫靡，故為置色弗譚，而桃穠薜英之遺音，若深諱於士大夫之口…故自冶容毀談，折鼎一足，而才與德乃兩尊於天下。

…才既不易言，而色又欲諱於言，士大夫又不肯泯泯其家之婦人女子，則不得不舉二者以盡歸之於德…則攷德故弗若衡才實矣。⁶⁷

Through parodying the “Three Transcendent Qualities,” which are specifically reserved for Confucian male elites, Ye Shaoyuan legitimates and reinserts the suspect quality of beauty into his concept of “Three Transcendent Qualities of Women.”⁶⁸ In this context, Ye Shaoyuan suggests that writings solely focusing on virtue were incapable of sketching out a genuine and panoramic image of outstanding women. When Ye Shaoyuan was compiling the collection, the pursuit of authenticity and *qing* were dominant literary and intellectual trends.⁶⁹ Beauty becomes one of the central points in Ye Shaoyuan’s writings as he strives to accurately present female family members and adequately express his *qing* towards them.

In order to claim beauty as a transcendent quality, Ye Shaoyuan needs to strip it of its negative associations. How does he do this? The first solution arises from the structure of the “Three Transcendent Qualities of Women”. At the beginning of the text, Ye Shaoyuan situates the Neo-Confucian virtue in the primary position and

⁶⁷ See Ye Shaoyuan’s preface to the *Wumengtang ji*, 1-3. The English translation is by me.

⁶⁸ The concept of “Three Transcendent Qualities” *san buxiu* 三不朽 can be dated back to *Zuo zhuan* 左傳: “I have heard that the highest meaning of it is when there is established [an example of] virtue; the second, when there is established [an example of] successful service; and the third, when there is established [an example of] wise] speech. When these examples are not forgotten with length of time, this is what is meant by the saying— “They do not decay.” 大上有立德，其次有立功，其次有立言，雖久不廢，此之謂不朽。” See Legge, *The Ch’un Ts’ew with The Tso Chuen*, Book IX. Duke Seang, 506-507.

⁶⁹ On the Gong’an school’s discussion on genuineness, see Chou, chapter 2. On the authenticity in late-Ming, see Epstein 59-69.

evoked the implicit Confucian values of the “Three Transcendent Qualities” by parodying its pattern. In Ye Shaoyuan’s context, *de* represents the Neo-Confucian virtues and acts as a regulative element. Further, as the most dominant element among the three qualities, *de* frames and regulates both beauty and talent.

Moreover, the creation of the concept “Three Transcendent Qualities of Women” is a projection of patriarchal male gaze towards the objectified woman, and the gaze also plays an important role in weakening the potentially transgressive beauty. Ko reads the emphasis on feminine beauty as a reflection of anxiety about maintaining the Confucian social hierarchies and “a result of a deeply felt need to restore a certain balance in the gender system by making women, now reading the Classics, publishing books, and taking up other ‘manly’ tasks, look more like women.”⁷⁰ By assuming the authority to write about and assess women, Ye Shaoyuan also asserts his prior position in the gender system and the Confucian hierarchy within his family.

When Ye Shaoyuan applies the concept of beauty in the “Three Transcendent Qualities of Women” to his most distinguished daughter Ye Xiaoluan, he explicitly identifies her as a fragile, beautiful *hongyan*:

Colorful clouds are easily scattered, shining pearls are easily shattered. In five years, Aunt Zhang and Xiaoluan met with each other. Is it true that *beauties are supposed to be ill-fated?*

⁷⁰ Ko, 162.

彩雲易散，明珠易碎，五年之間，姘甥兩見，豈紅顏必薄命耶?!⁷¹

“*Beauties are ill-fated*”, could this concept apply to you?
紅顏薄命，至汝而爽，豈其然歟?⁷²

In these contexts, Ye Shaoyuan rejects the set expression *hongyan boming* by instead splitting *hongyan* from *boming*. When he references *hongyan boming* to explain Xiaoluan's early death, he also questions the cause-effect relationship between *hongyan* as a fragile beauty and *boming* as ill-fate, suggesting that beauty is not necessarily destined to be ill-fated. The classical particles, *qi* 豈, *bi* 必, *ye* 耶, *yu* 歟 used in asking rhetorical questions, make explicit his suspicions of the causal logic implicit in the phrase. He embraces the notion that his daughter was a fragile beauty *hongyan*, but he rejects the notion that Xiaoluan's early death is a consequence of her beauty. Ye Shaoyuan's usages of the expression of *hongyan boming* above are more of a reluctant expression emanating from a father's distress, and do not fit with his original expectations of Ye Xiaoluan, as expressed in Ye Shaoyuan's *Ji wangnü*

Xiaoluan wen:

Your mother and I have missed you so much. We have talked about your appearance, virtue, manner, and speech. We thought all of them foretold a long life and high status. There should be no reason for the disaster of early death. How could the principles of the heaven be so unpredictable!

我與汝母千思萬憶，念汝姿容德性、神氣言辭，並為貴壽之徵，斷無

⁷¹ See Ye Shaoyuan's comment on *Jisi chun ku shenliujiumu musuo* 己巳春哭沈六舅母墓所 in Ye Xiaoluan, "Fansheng xiang" 376. He composed this comment after Xiaoluan's death. The English translation is by me.

⁷² See Ye Shaoyuan, "Ji wangnü Xiaoluan wen 祭亡女小鸞文" in Ye Xiaoluan, *Fansheng xiang*, 447. The English translation is by me.

夭亡之禍，如何天道如此不測。⁷³

In this eulogy, Ye Shaoyuan reveals the incompatibility of an early death and its integration unto the “Three Transcendent Qualities of Women”, and they incompatibility finally lead to split the concept of fragile beautiful *hongyan* off from early death. Ye Shaoyuan regards Xiaoluan as the perfect embodiment of his concept of the “Three Transcendent Qualities of Women,” and he also previously believed that the integration is auspicious rather than lethal. However, Xiaoluan’s premature death contradicts his views and reminds him of the “truth” of the expression *hongyan boming*. When Ye Shaoyuan begins, hesitantly, to use this expression, it also undermines his concept of the three qualities, so he ultimately has to retain the logic of the belief that beauties are fated to die young. Therefore, to justify his concept of the “Three Transcendent Qualities of Women,” and to find an explanation for Xiaoluan’s death that leaves intact his belief that “virtue, beauty, and talent” are all positive qualities, Ye Shaoyuan has to de-articulate the causal link between beauty and an early death.

In Ye Shaoyuan’s *Ji wangnü Xiaoluan wen*, he enumerates seven reasons for Xiaoluan’s death, based on her virtue, talent, beauty, and yearning for the transcendent world. In his explanation of the third reason, Shaoyuan frames Xiaoluan’s beauty as inseparable from her talent and virtue:

⁷³ Ye Shaoyuan, “Ji wangnü Xiaoluan wen”, 445. The English translation is by me.

Your talent and beauty were like that, and virtue was like this. In the world, people rarely had all of them. They were the third reason for your death.
才色若彼，德又若此，世鮮兼備。汝死三也。⁷⁴

As we shall see in the passage translated below, Ye Shaoyuan explains his daughter's untimely death as a result of her desire to become immortal. To provide an appropriate explanation of Xiaoluan's death without the system of the "Three Transcendent Qualities of Women," Ye Shaoyuan pushes Xiaoluan's death into a transcendent dimension that frames her death as becoming a Daoist immortal (*xiansi* 仙死).⁷⁵ Shaoyuan writes that Xiaoluan's combination of the three transcendent qualities was somehow so outstanding that she could not be contained by the mundane world. "In the world, it is rare for anyone to have all of them." In other words, Ye Shaoyuan reads his daughter's death not as a cosmic punishment but as a reward for her rare combination of virtue, beauty and talent. Beauty, in combination with talent and virtue, is no longer a source of disaster, but a prerequisite for an early death. Consequently, Ye Shaoyuan substitutes immortality for early death: to be a beautiful, talented and moral *hongyan* is no longer to be ill-fated but to be immortal.

Ye Shaoyuan further expounds on his fantasy of Xiaoluan's immortalization in two other essays *Qie wen* 竊聞 and *Xu qie wen* 續竊聞. In *Qie wen*, Ye Shaoyuan turns to the supernatural to explore Xiaoluan's afterlife:

⁷⁴ Ye Shaoyuan, "Ji wangnü Xiaoluan wen", 446. The English translation is by me.

⁷⁵ "My third daughter Qiongzhang died transcendentally when she just turned sixteen years old. 季女瓊章，方破瓜以仙死。" See Ye Shaoyuan's preface to the *Wumengtang ji*, 2.

I arrived at the home on the third, sighed and cried with my wife face to face. On that night when I fell asleep, I dreamt of Qiongzhang in the red shirt and white skirt, prettier and more brilliant than before. I said: “Are we separated by the heaven and the mundane world? Are we separated by the dark world and bright world?” She answered: “No, we are not separated.” I said: “If not separated, why can I not see you?” She said: “You cannot see me, but I can always see you and mother.” I said: “Where are you now?” She said: “In heaven.” I said: “Are there jade pipes, rare flowers, fragrant herbs for you to enjoy in the heaven?” She said: “Yes. But to serve the Jade Emperor every day is hard work.” I said: “People said there is a deity in charge of books in the Jade Emperor’s court, are you the *female historian* in charge of literature?” She said: “Yes.”

余初三日抵家廬，與內子相對嘆泣。是夜就枕，即夢瓊章紅衣素裙，光麗倍昔。余曰：“余與汝，仙凡隔邪？幽明隔邪？”女曰：“不隔。”余曰：“不隔，胡不見汝？”曰：“父母不見兒，兒固見父母爾。”余曰：“今在何處？”曰：“天上。”余曰：“天上有瑤琴瓊管與汝弄，名花香草與汝玩邪？”曰：“有。但日侍玉皇，差勞苦爾。”余曰：“人言玉皇殿上掌書仙，汝果作修文女史邪？”曰：“然。”⁷⁶

In his fantasy, Ye Shaoyuan consoles himself by shaping Xiaoluan into the embodiment of his value system for women and using Xiaoluan’s deification as proof of the validity of his system, which is under the risk of disintegration. When Ye Shaoyuan sees Xiaoluan in his mind’s eye, he focuses first on her beauty: “in the red shirt and white skirt, [she is] prettier and more brilliant than before.” Only later does he confirm if she was given an official title of *Xiuwen nishi* 修文女史. In this context, *nishi* 女史 refers to Ban Zhao 班昭 (45-117), who used her talent to compose the Confucian didactic book *Lessons For Women* (*Nüjie* 女誡), and

⁷⁶ Ye Shaoyuan, “Qie wen,” 622-623. The English translation is by me.

therefore became a moral model for women.⁷⁷ By overlapping the images of Xiaoluan and Ban Zhao, Ye Shaoyuan reveals his fantasy of Xiaoluan, whose literary talent submits to the moral principles, but also receives the most transcendent, authoritative recognition from the Jade Emperor's court. Here Xiaoluan's high status and appearance corresponds to Ye Shaoyuan's original expectations for her; by transforming her into a goddess, he makes Xiaoluan a continuation of her promise as a mortal—the embodiment of the integration of virtue, talent, and beauty. By creating this posthumous vision of Xiaoluan, Ye Shaoyuan reaffirms the logic of his concept of the “Three Transcendent Qualities of Women” and is able to reclaim his authority to record, interpret and assess the women of his family.

Through Ye Shaoyuan's interpretations of *hongyan* as an integration of virtue, talent and beauty, we can find that the central intent of Ye Shaoyuan's writings about Xiaoluan is never to capture the historic Xiaoluan but rather how to use Xiaoluan as an instantiation of his concept of “Three Transcendent Qualities of Women.” To justify this concept, Ye Shaoyuan first semantically de-articulates the word *hongyan* from *boming*, then invests the previously stigmatized *hongyan* with Confucian virtue and literary talent, and finally transforms the logic of *hongyan* beauty from its traditional association with disaster into something that could serve as a catalyst for

⁷⁷ *Nishi* refers to literary women of an official title and in charge of court rites. It dates back to the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮): “The female historian is in charge of the queen's rites and she assists the domestic management. 女史掌王後之禮職，掌內治之貳。” See the Chinese text in Zheng and Jia, 233; the English translation is by me. Ban Zhao is the earliest *nishi* in extant records. For more information, see Hu Wenkai 胡文楷 (1899-1988), 2-3.

his daughter's transformation into an immortal.

Mother's Voice: Reconciliation of Female Autonomy and Male Gaze

If Ye Shaoyuan's writings present a patriarchal view of Xiaoluan from the *wai* space, then Shen Yixiu's writings exhibit a combination of the patriarchal gaze and women's consciousness of their subjectivity in that she was the central person connecting the cloistered interior of the household to the *wai* space. Compared to her husband, Shen Yixiu enjoyed a more intimate physical and psychological proximity to Xiaoluan, and Shen Yixiu also tried to present Xiaoluan's subjectivity in part of her writings.⁷⁸ However, as Ye Shaoyuan's partner and a parent in the patriarchal Ye family, Shen Yixiu also inevitably follows patriarchal literary conventions in adopting the male gaze in her writings.

By recording Xiaoluan's expressions and words, Shen Yixiu's memorial essay differs from Ye Shaoyuan's in revealing the female's self-conscious voice. For example, in Shen Yixiu's memorial essay for Ye Xiaoluan, *Biography of the Third Daughter Qiongzhang* (*Jin ü Qiongzhang zhuan* 季女瓊章傳), Shen Yixiu uses Xiaoluan's own words to reflect her self-identification and attitude towards beauty:

⁷⁸ There are many records of literary interactions between Ye Xiaoluan and her mother, see "Xiachu jiaon nü xuexiu yougan 夏初教女學繡有感" in Shen Yixiu, 36; "Oujian shuangmei tong nü zuo 偶見雙美同女作" in Shen Yixiu, 84; "Xishi Qiongzhang 戲示瓊章" in Shen Yixiu, 216; "Ciqin mingzuo sishi ge 慈親命作四時歌" in Ye Xiaoluan, 366-368; "Oujian shuangmei tong mu ji zhongjie zuo 偶見雙美同母及仲姊作" in Ye Xiaoluan, 374; "Qiuri tong liangjie zuoci mu ming weixu 秋日同兩姊作詞母命為序" in Ye Xiaoluan, 425;

Her father once teased her, saying “My daughter, your peerless beauty is enough to take one’s breath away.” She responded by sulky: “What is so valuable about women’s beauty being able to overthrow a city? Why must father inflict this [kind of] beauty on me?”

父嘗戲謂“兒有絕世之姿”，兒必慍曰：“女子傾城之色，何所取貴，父何必加之於兒。”⁷⁹

Ye Xiaoluan’s rejection of what her father thought was a positive comment on her beauty illustrates her own attitude toward beauty. From her perspective, beauty indicates a destructive sexual power and she does not like her father’s commentary on her beauty which transforms her into a sexualized object. Shen Yixiu does not construct Xiaoluan as a fragile *hongyan* beauty waiting to be recognized and inscribed by a male literatus, but as a girl who self-consciously rejects any notion that beauty is part of her essential nature.

However, Shen Yixiu’s depictions of the self-conscious Xiaoluan reproduces certain patriarchal conventions. I will take Shen Yixiu’s record of the scene before Xiaoluan’s death as an example:

On the fifteenth of the 9th month...the gift from the betrothed husband’s family arrived, and my daughter became ill right on this night. The wedding day was coming, yet her illness became so severe that she could not get up. On the 10th day of the 10th month, her father had no choice but to allow the betrothed husband to come and get married. Then he walked into the room and told our daughter: “I have already promised him, so try to get yourself together, do not miss the auspicious day.” She became silent. Right after her father walked out, she called out Hongyu and asked her: “what day is it today?” Hongyu answered: “The 10th of the 10th month.” She sighed: “Being so fast, how could there still be time?” Because her illness did not show any

⁷⁹ Shen Yixiu, 247. The English translation is by me.

improvement, and the betrothed husband's family was urging us to marry her, I inevitably became anxious. But I did not realize that in the next morning, we would have such a tragedy.”

九月十五日，…婿家行催妝禮至，而兒即於是夕病亦。于歸已近，竟成不起之疾。十月十日，父不得已，許婿來就婚，即至房中，對兒云：“我已許彼矣，努力自攝，無誤佳期。”兒默然，父出，即喚紅于問曰：“今日何日？”云：“十月初十。”兒嘆曰：“如此甚速，如何來得及？”未免以病未有起色，婿家催迫為焦耳。不意至次日天明，遂有此慘禍也。

80

In this passage, by indicating Xiaoluan's hesitant attitude towards her approaching wedding, Shen Yixiu suggests that the patriarchal system directly caused Xiaoluan's death. Under this system, Xiaoluan was supposed to accept an arranged marriage, even when it went against her will, and to surrender her autonomy and freedom to a family of strangers. Though Shen Yixiu does not explicitly mention that Xiaoluan had any antagonism towards the wedding, Xiaoluan's increasingly severe sickness may indicate an unvoiced aversion towards the marriage and her betrothed. As the text suggests, Xiaoluan's illness can be traced to the moment when her betrothed urges the Ye family to prepare for the wedding. As the wedding day was approaching, her illness became even worse. When her father announces that even he cannot intervene and save her from this marriage, Xiaoluan comes to the end of her life, only five days before the official wedding.

It is significant that Ye Shaoyuan deleted this passage from the second edition of the *Wumengtang ji* published in 1639, as a way of indicating his unhappiness with this

⁸⁰ Shen Yixiu, 248. The English translation is by me.

narrative. The modern scholar Ji Qin 冀勤 (1934-) has compared second edition with the first edition published in 1636, examining every passage deleted from the second edition. She suggests that the scene depicting Xiaoluan's death might be taboo, which was why Ye Shaoyuan decided to delete it. Ji Qin also cites the comment by Li Yimeng 李一氓 (1903-1990) on this scene, in which he implies that Ye Shaoyuan was trying to cover up the actual reason behind Xiaoluan's death—the marriage.⁸¹

In my opinion, this paragraph in Shen Yixiu's writing displeased Ye Shaoyuan because it threatened Ye Shaoyuan's concept of the "Three Transcendent Qualities of Women" and his desire to construct his daughter as an immortal who was too good for life as a mortal. While Shen Yixiu implicitly blames the patriarchal system for killing Xiaoluan, Shen Yixiu situates herself in opposition to the patriarchal marriage system which deprives brides of any agency. In this passage, in which the author reveals her daughter as victim, she is no longer an obedient wife and mother going along with the Neo-Confucian status quo. Moreover, she explicitly denies Ye Shaoyuan's narrative that their daughter lived and died as an embodiment of the "Three Transcendent Qualities of Women."⁸² Since Xiaoluan's marriage was arranged by two patriarchal families and represented patriarchal power, Xiaoluan's rejection of it again distanced her from the image of a gentle lady of Neo-Confucian virtue. Because this paragraph

⁸¹ See Ji, 9: "What did the editor want to conceal by deleting this paragraph? This paragraph implies that Xiaoluan's death is due to her marriage. 刪去這一段，想掩飾什麼？此段文字隱隱道出小鸞之死為婚事也。"

⁸² In Ye Shaoyuan's memorial essay for Shen Yixiu, he constructs her as an embodiment of the three transcendent qualities. See Ko 161.

of the event rejects his positive narrative logic of the “Three Transcendent Qualities of Woman”, Ye Shaoyuan had to alter Shen Yixiu’s writing in order to erase this critique of patriarchal culture and reaffirm the notion that his daughter accepted the culture that celebrates the objectification as a beautiful daughter as well as a desirable bride. By so doing, he obscures the women’s own voices. It is only because later scholars stripped away Ye Shaoyuan’s efforts to edit his wife’s writings that we are able to hear the original voices of these women.

However, most of Shen Yixiu’s depictions of her daughter incorporate normative patriarchal views about women. In her memorial essay for Xiaoluan, Shen Yixiu constructs her daughter as a transcendent, talented girl:

She was open-minded and unrestrained, hated onerousness and magnificence, loved poetic mists and clouds, knew Chan Buddhism well. She was so proud of her intelligence that she once said: “I want my knowledge to have mastery over the past and present.”she does not like new clothes.....Regarding gold and money as pollution, she was limpid and had no desire.

性高曠，厭繁華，愛煙霞，通禪理。自恃穎姿，嘗言“欲博盡今古”。…衣服不喜新…視金錢若浼，淡然無求。⁸³

Shen Yixiu legitimates Ye Xiaoluan’s excessive ambition for erudition by containing her ambition within a transcendent discourse of reclusion, so that her construction of Ye Xiaoluan would not threaten Xiaoluan’s virtue as constructed by Ye Shaoyuan. As the text of *Nüjie* which I cited previously demonstrates, Xiaoluan’s

⁸³ Shen Yixiu, 247. The English translation is by me.

self-consciousness of and pride in her intelligence, and her bold announcements of literary ambition do not fit with the requirements of women in *Nüjie*. What is worse, if her writings and knowledge of her intelligence are to enter into the *wai* space belonging to men, Xiaoluan would disrupt the gender system which teaches women to keep their bodies and words cloistered. In the conservative Neo-Confucian view, it is as transgressive for a woman's writings to circulate outside the women's quarters as it is for a woman to leave this space. In this text, Shen Yixiu has to make Xiaoluan's desire for knowledge consistent with her description of Xiaoluan— "be limpid and have no desire" (*danran wuqiu* 淡然無求), and thereby prevent Xiaoluan from endangering the patriarchal system and its literary conventions. Consequently, Shen Yixiu frames Ye Xiaoluan's desire for knowledge as one that seeks only for her own personal spiritual fulfillment, which is opposed to any mundane desire for material possessions, and distances Xiaoluan from the *wai* space of men.

Shen Yixiu's interpretation that Xiaoluan was seeking after personal spiritual fulfillment is intimately connected with the Neo-Confucianism. Originally, in *The Analects* (*Lun yu* 論語), Confucius mentions two modes of studying: "In ancient times, men learned with a view to their own improvement. Nowadays, men learn with a view to the approbation of others. 古之學者為己，今之學者為人。"⁸⁴

Neo-Confucianism adopts this concept from the *Analects* to further demonstrate the

⁸⁴ Legge, "Confucian Analects," Chapter 14, 285.

importance of self-cultivation. In *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, Zhu Xi does not propose his own interpretation of this sentence but refers to the comment by Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107): “For one’s self” means wanting to gain knowledge for oneself; ‘for the others’ means wanting to be known and recognized by other people. 為己，欲得之於己也。為人，欲見知於人也。”⁸⁵ In Neo-Confucianism, “to study for oneself (*weiji zhi xue* 為己之學)” is equal to the pursuit of genuineness and opposed to the hypocrisy of “studying for other people (*weiren zhi xue* 為人之學).” In Xiaoluan’s case, her desire for knowledge and her disinterest in worldly interests all point to unworldly desire—“to study for oneself” (*weiji zhi xue*). Shen Yixiu succeeds in emphasizing that Xiaoluan was obsessed with the aesthetic values of literature itself, rather than the cultural capital that accompanies the study of literature.

Although Shen Yixiu tries to incorporate her daughter’s own words into the memorial essay, she could not escape from the overwhelming patriarchal discourse and the male gaze. She not only addresses Xiaoluan as an immortalized goddess but also transforms her daughter into a sexualized object.⁸⁶

One early morning, I stood by your bed and saw you, face unwashed and hair uncombed, charming and graceful beyond belief. I teased you: “you didn’t like it when others said you’re beautiful. But look at you, so pretty even ungroomed! Even I find you irresistible; what will your future husband have to say?”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Zhu, 155. The English translation is by me.

⁸⁶ Shen Yixiu, 248-249.

⁸⁷ Translation cited from Ko, see Ko, 166-167.

一日曉起，立余床前，面酥未洗，宿發未梳，風神韻致，亭亭無比，余戲謂之曰：“兒瞋人讚汝色美，今粗服亂頭尚且如此，真所謂笑笑生芳，步步移妍矣，我見猶憐，未知畫眉人道汝何如！”⁸⁸

In this scene, by adopting the male gaze, Shen Yixiu turns her relation with Xiaoluan from a mother-daughter relationship into a sexualized husband-wife relationship. While gazing at Xiaoluan, Shen Yixiu could not resist impersonating Xiaoluan's husband (*huamei ren* 畫眉人) and reading Xiaoluan's beauty not as a quality of merely aesthetic value but as a quality easily translated into a sexual capital. By asserting her appreciation for Xiaoluan's beauty—*wojian youlian* 我見猶憐, Shen Yixiu situates herself in a masculine position as a protector, locating Xiaoluan in an inferior, vulnerable, and objectified position waiting to be protected. At the end of this passage, when Shen Yixiu is anticipating her daughter's fiancé's comments on Xiaoluan's beauty, she reaffirms normative gender relations: the wife's beauty is supposed to be observed and commented on by her husband—the representative of the patriarchal system. Shen Yixiu personally defines her comment as a joke between mother and the daughter, as the words “teasing” (*xiwei* 戲謂) indicates, but Shen Yixiu's words offer a unilateral construction of Ye Xiaoluan and most importantly, a continuation of patriarchal literary conventions.

As a figure bridging the patriarchal objectifying gaze and female desires for autonomy, Yixiu's construction of Ye Xiaoliao succeeds in incorporating some of

⁸⁸ Shen Yixiu, 247. The English translation is by me.

Xiaoluan's own voice while failing to construct a female voice that could outweigh the powerful patriarchal literary conventions.

Xiaoluan's Voice: Rejection and Reinterpretation of the Ephemeral Beauty

(boming hongyan)

From Ye Xiaoluan's writings, the historic person Ye Xiaoluan had the chance to write by herself and for herself, to assert her self-identification and reject certain patriarchal constructions and the established gender relationships which confines women within *nei* space.

In her own writings, Xiaoluan does not use the word *hongyan* but uses the style *Zhumeng zi* 煮夢子 as an embodiment of herself:

Record of A Night at the Plantain Window (A playful writing in 1631)
Zhumeng zi hid in the room, and cared nothing about worldly events but poems and wine.....*Zhumeng zi* proudly had the aspiration to become an immortal, thus disappointedly composed a poem: "The River Ruoshui and Mount Penglai are far away, my worries cannot be restrained by myself. If Chang'e has the intention, the moon will shine the light on my window where I read books." And another poem: "When the cry fades, the bright moon falls; when the song ends, the colorful clouds flow away. I would like to turn to the Queen Mother of the West, and borrow a bottle of Jade Nectar from her."

蕉窗夜記（辛未戲作）

煮夢子隱於一室之內，惟詩酒是務，了不關世事。……傲然有懷仙之志，悵然作詩曰：“弱水蓬萊遠，愁懷難自降。素娥如有意，偏照讀書窗。”又：“嘯殘明月墮，歌罷彩雲流。願向西王母，瓊漿借一甌。”⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Ye Xiaoluan, 426. The English translation is by me.

The literal translation of Zhumeng zi—“the person that cooks the dream” is in reference to another of Tang Xianzu’s dramas, *Handan ji* 邯鄲記.⁹⁰ In this drama, the protagonist Lu Sheng 盧生 starts dreaming while the waiter is cooking rice. In the dream, he has been through ups and downs and fulfilled all mundane desires, such as achieving an official title, obtaining money and land, marrying a beautiful and gentle lady who gives birth to many children. However, though he has experienced a lifetime of vicissitudes in the dream, when he wakes up, the rice has not yet finished cooking. After realizing the ephemerality of the world, Lu Sheng arrives at enlightenment and decides to follow Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 to Mount Penglai 蓬萊 and stay in the Daoist paradise.⁹¹

Though Xiaoluan refers to *Handan ji*, she does not follow Lu Sheng’s pattern of enlightenment in this text, but instead reinterprets the concept of “*zhumeng*” to present her ambition to become a Daoist immortal. In fact, Xiaoluan surpasses *Handan ji* by presenting a more self-conscious protagonist. Although Xiaoluan assumes the name of the unenlightened Lu Sheng, who is then “cooking the dream,” she also distances herself from the unenlightened Lu Sheng. Unlike Lu Sheng who

⁹⁰ Ye Shaoyuan referred to *Handan ji* in his comment on this essay: “It was strange that my beautiful daughter in the boudoir named herself after Zhumeng zi. The adoption of the two characters “zhumeng” was creative and refreshing. Did it mean ‘the yellow sorghum has not been cooked thoroughly, the person has already arrived at Huaxu through one dream’?” 閨中婉孌，自託名煮夢子，固奇。‘煮夢’二字，造意尤新，豈‘黃梁猶未熟，一夢到華胥’之意歟？” See Ye Xiaoluan, 426.

⁹¹ According to de Bary, in East Asia, individual enlightenment was a conscious goal of spiritual cultivation or religious practice for centuries, and the Chinese indigenous term for it was *wu* 悟. See de Bary, “Neo-Confucian Cultivation and the Seventeenth-Century ‘Enlightenment’,” 141.

only comes to realize his previous unenlightenment after experiencing mundane Confucian desires, Zhumeng zi has already been aware of her current unenlightened state and expresses her aspiration to enter an enlightened, transcendental world in the future.

Zhumeng zi also differs from Lu Sheng in the process of becoming an immortal. To achieve enlightenment, Zhumeng zi consciously refrains from engagement with worldly events (*shiwu* 世務) and only focuses on personal aesthetic activities—composing poetry and drinking wine. As I have argued previously, for Xiaoluan, literary knowledge represents the pursuit of genuineness and self-enjoyment. Similarly, in this context, poetry and wine could bring the protagonist enjoyment and spiritual and physical self-indulgence. They represent an aesthetic self-contained realm free from any moral or emotional restraints, where Zhumeng zi could approach a transcendental physiological state.

Apart from reinterpreting male literature, Xiaoluan also challenges male literary conventions of writing about women. For example, in her writing of the Double Seventh Festival (*qixi* 七夕), she rejects the whole literary constructions of this festival, which is specifically targeted at women, and their implicit intention to reaffirm patriarchal gender relationships.⁹²

⁹² The Double Seventh Festival dates back to Han dynasty, and it became a festival when women prayed for skills at needlework and love between couples. As *Xijing zaji* 西京雜記 records: “In Han dynasty, court ladies usually threaded a needle of seven holes at Kaijin Tower on the seventh day of the seventh month, then people all learned from them. 漢綵女常以七月七日穿七孔鍼於開襟樓，俱以習之。” See Ge, 3. “When it came to the seventh day

Double Seventh Day

I have heard that the goddess and the flowing clouds are both a result of fantasies;
That Chang'e flew to the moon also could not be regarded as truth.

Therefore, people all said that [a person] once obtained the supporting stone of [Zhi
Nü's 織女] loom,

I personally think [the person] has never arrived at the river where the cow drinks.⁹³
Consequently, the custom of praying for skills on needlework was transmitted without
solid evidence,

Women held the erroneous belief that [whether they have obtained the skills on
needlework depends on] the web woven by the spider;

Where is the evidence of magpies' filling the river,

[People] randomly spread the words that the spirit magpies ferried the person [Niū
Lang 牛郎].

七夕

妾聞神女行雲，皆由於誕；姮娥奔月，亦豈為真。

故世咸謂曾得支機之石，私竊以為未至飲牛之津。

是以乞巧空傳，誤信蜘蛛之織網；填河何據，漫言靈鵲之渡人。⁹⁴

The legends of the Double Seventh Day treat the skills on needlework and love in the
marriage as the most essential things of women's lives. However, in this poem, Ye

of the seventh month, [the court lady] arrived at Baizi Pool, played the music from Yutian. When the music ended, she wove threads of five colors together, indicating to connect and love each other. 至七月七日，臨百子池，作于闐樂。樂畢，以五色縷相羈，謂為相連愛。” See Ge, 22. Also, seven is the number for women, because each seven year cycle construct a biological circulation of women. As *Huangdi neijing suwen* 黃帝內經素問 records: “When a girl is seven years of age, the emanations of the kidneys become abundant, she begins to change her teeth and her hair grows longer. When she reaches her fourteenth year she begins to menstruate and is able to become pregnant and the movement in the great thoroughfare pulse is strong. Menstruation comes at regular times, thus the girl is able to give birth to a child. When the girl reaches the age of twenty-one years the emanations of the kidneys are regular, the last tooth has come out, and she is fully grown…… When she reaches the age of forty-nine she can no longer become pregnant and the circulation of the great thoroughfare pulse is decreased. Her menstruation is exhausted, and the gates of menstruation are no longer open; her body deteriorates and she is no longer able to bear children. 女子七歲，腎氣盛，齒更發長。二七而天癸至，任脈通，太沖脈盛，月事以時下，故有子。三七，腎氣平均，故真牙生而長極。……七七，任脈虛，太沖脈衰少，天癸竭，地道不痛，故形壞而無子也。” See English translation in Veith and Barnes, *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*, 98-99; Chinese text in Gao, *Huangdi neijing suwen*, 3-4.

⁹³ The third and fourth lines refer to a story recorded in *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽: “There was a person seeking after the origin of river. After seeing a woman washing the gauze, he asked her where it is. She answered: ‘This is the river of heaven.’ And then she gave a stone to him and let him return. He then asked Yanping, who said that the stone is Zhi Nü's supporting stone of her loom. 昔有一人尋河源，見婦人浣紗以問之，曰：‘此天河也。’乃與一石而歸。問嚴君平，云此織女支機石也。” See Chinese text in Li Fang, *Taiping yulan*, vol.1, 42. The English translation is by me.

⁹⁴ Ye Xiaoluan, 424. The English translation is by me.

Xiaoluan does not accept the legends of goddesses nor the legends of the Double Seventh Day as they are conventionally narrated. Instead, she questions the authenticity of those legends, turning the poem into a realm where she can express a critical, subjective voice. By pointing out that the stories originated from fantasies, Xiaoluan indicates her awareness that women's desires for skills and love are also results of literary and cultural constructions. Based on this, she rejects the whole constructions of the Double Seventh Festival, including the notion that women's handicraft depends on spider's web and that the magpies help complete a romantic relationship. As the contemporary scholar Wang Tianpeng 王天鹏 demonstrates, the celebration of the Double Seventh Festival aimed to reaffirm gender relationships and express the patriarchal worship of fertility.⁹⁵ Therefore, Xiaoluan's denial of the story of Double Seventh Festival is not only a rejection of the myth, but also a rejection of patriarchal society's endeavor to restrain women within the *nei* space and let them focus on nothing beyond Neo-Confucian ritual principles for women.

In Xiaoluan's extant writings, the word *hongyan* appears only once, yet Xiaoluan's only usage of *hongyan* simply as youthful beauty further suggests her rejection of the patriarchal construction of this word:

Huangying er
(There is a woman, she is old but still does not have a mate.)

⁹⁵ Wang Tianpeng expounds on the social and cultural functions of the Double Seventh Festival, see Wang Tianpeng, 26-27.

Everyone is laughing at her, so I write down this playful lyric for fun.)

She has leaned on all jade railings,
Counting the spring melancholy,
In several idle days.

The fragrant skin is worn out and heart is broken.

The silky clothes gradually become mottled,
The oriole and flower gradually become sparse,
The *young beauty* becomes old, signing vainly.

She closes the door,

And the sound of the jade flute drifts far way,

On which date would she have a mate?

黃鶯兒

(有一女，年甚長而未偶，眾共笑之，戲為作此。)

倚遍玉闌幹，數春愁，幾日閑。香肌瘦盡腸還斷。羅衫漸斑，鶯花漸殘，紅顏老去空長嘆。掩重關，玉簫聲遠，何日駕雙鸞。⁹⁶

In Xiaoluan's context, she shows her sympathy for an unmarried woman by depicting the woman's melancholy and lonely life. In the line "the *young beauty* becomes old, signing vainly 紅顏老去空長嘆," Xiaoluan does not write the youthful beautiful *hongyan* as the main cause of the woman's sorrows and lonely life, but as a positive, cherishable characteristic of aesthetic values. This lyric suggests that Xiaoluan neither adopts her father's interpretation of *hongyan* as an immortalized, talented and moral beauty, nor the negative interpretation of *hongyan* as dangerous and punishable women. By using the word *hongyan* in a sympathetic and aesthetic way, Xiaoluan rejects the patriarchal literary conventions and insists on her subjective understandings and interpretations of women.

Although Xiaoluan's writings risk the reinterpretations of male literati after her

⁹⁶ Ye Xiaoluan, 420. The English translation is by me.

death, Xiaoluan endeavored to preserve her own voice through writing and successfully transmitted her thoughts to contemporary readers. Xiaoluan's self-identification as Zhumeng zi, her rejection of the cultural construction of the Double Seventh Festival and patriarchal interpretations of *hongyan* as stigmatized or immortalized beauty, all exhibit her self-consciousness, her desire to distance herself from the patriarchal world and to distinguish her subjectivity.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: THE INFINITE FANTASIES OF WOMEN IN THE OMNIPRESENT MALE GAZE

My original purpose in looking into the set phrase *boming hongyan* was to see how late-Ming writers endowed these previously objectified beauties with subjectivity under the cult of *qing*, and thus to present a consistent interpretation of *boming hongyan* in the late Ming. However, after reading *The Peony Pavilion* and the *Wumengtang ji*, I realized that this purpose was impractical because the different genders and social status of the writers and commentators together contributed to complex interpretations of *hongyan boming*, and gender dynamics were extremely critical to understand how different writers manipulate the images of *boming hongyan*.

In my view, the new interpretations of *boming hongyan* in the late Ming were just another literati fantasy of women that functioned in service to a patriarchal society and literary conventions. Compared to its meanings before the late Ming, the concept of *boming hongyan* in male literati's writings during the late Ming distinguished itself by being presented as a positive sign of immortalization. In their writings, the power of *qing* overweighs the implicit destructive, immoral power of women's sexually attractive appearance and furthermore turns this appearance into an aestheticized, ideal image of women that contemporary literati celebrated. In other words, even

though late-Ming usages of *hongyan* de-stigmatized and immortalized beauty, they were under the male gaze and male literati who have been treating *hongyan*'s physical beauty as a critical component of young women's identity and subjectivity.

Under the discourse of *qing*, male writers use *boming hongyan* as an instantiation of their ideal aesthetic image and *qing* values. Even though the male writers might give the *boming hongyan* subjectivity, they could not avoid projecting their objectifying male gaze onto the female body and subordinating the young women's autonomy to the authoritative male gaze. Ultimately, *boming hongyan* could not escape its origins in the patriarchal literary conventions. In Tang Xianzu's fictional drama, he constructs Du Liniang as a *boming hongyan* and also as an embodiment of *qing*, but in the end, Liniang needs the male gaze to preserve her essence and make her subjectivity legible. In Ye Shaoyuan's writings of Ye Xiaoluan, he disregards Xiaoluan's self-identification, insisting on interpreting her as a *boming hongyan* against her will. Though his presentation of Xiaoluan's literary talent is in agreement with Xiaoluan's will, Ye Shaoyuan mainly constructs Xiaoluan to foreground his concept of the "Three Transcendent Qualities of Women" and Xiaoluan's embodiment of the three qualities, which also represent the contemporary male literati's fantasy of ideal women. By so doing, Ye Shaoyuan reaffirms his social status as a literatus and incorporates the talented and transcendental image of Xiaoluan into the cultural capital of the patriarchal Ye family.

Nonetheless, the surviving works of the female writers in the Ye family give us the opportunity to see how women interpreted the trope of youthful beauty and how they reacted to the male constructions of *hongyan*. As Shen Yixiu's and Ye Xiaoluan's works reveal, female writers were more inclined to be compassionate with ill-fated beauties and faithfully record women's emotions and voice, but they did not adopt the idiom *boming hongyan*, nor did they accept the male gaze behind the image of female beauty.

However, the patriarchal literary conventions were so powerful that even women's writings could not completely escape from them. It is worth noting that Shen Yixiu's writings also reveal that women's willing identification with patriarchal values also affect their writing, and their self-conscious writings might have occasionally incorporated male literary conventions. For example, Shen Yixiu also projects a masculinized gaze towards Ye Xiaoluan. Even though Shen Yixiu implicitly express her resentment towards the patriarchal social order in her writing of Xiaoluan's death, her writings have been processed and her resentment has been erased by Ye Shaoyuan. Ye Shaoyuan's editing of women's writings suggest that despite the fact that women were able to write, their works nevertheless risked being reinterpreted by male literati and incorporated into patriarchal literary conventions.

Yet, Ye Xiaoluan's writings demonstrate that despite the risk of being reinterpreted, writing was still an approach to express and preserve their

self-consciousness. Through works that endeavored to create an autonomous voice like that of Ye Xiaoluan, female writers exhibit an intention to differentiate their writings from the male literary conventional writings. Although ultimately, female writers' works might have been incapable of forming a distinct style that completely disengaged from the male writing conventions, they have at least exhibited their endeavor to record their individual consciousness.

In the end, I have to admit that despite female writers' efforts to record and construct their subjective voices through writing, women's self-expression has been under an infinite process of being reinterpreted and reconstructed, which is full of fluidity. Consequently, the original meanings of women's writings and the self-identities they intended to articulate are subject to being subsumed by male writing conventions.

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