

■ Bosom Friends in the Red Chamber: Women's Friendship Poetry in Late Imperial China

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Abstract

Friendship is gendered in literati discourse in dynastic China. In contrast to the large repertoire of stories, poems, and plays about male friendship, depictions of female friendship are scarce in classical male-authored Chinese literature. The silence on the subject of women's friendship in literati tradition was loudly contradicted in gentry women's poetry. In this article, I examine lyric poems on friendship exchanged between gentry women writers in China from the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. I propose a reading of these poetic writings as a sub-genre of friendship poetry and argue that women writers used this poetic venue to consolidate mutual interests with like-minded writers, to achieve imaginative self-realization, to revise definitions of femininity, and to create and develop a distinct female literary tradition.

Keywords: friendship, femininity, subjectivity, late imperial China, lyric poetry

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Introduction

The lonely woman longing for her absent (male) lover in an exquisite boudoir is a popular image constructed by male literati writers in their verse. However, lyric poems on friendship exchanged between gentry women writers in the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries China easily subvert this trope. Many poems by gentry women of this era were written to or for other women, a lot of whom were their friends. For these writers, as Maureen Robertson points out in her recent article, “other women were their most devoted readers and serious supporters” (377). In poems where gentry women writers sought to establish, maintain, or develop their friendships with other women, we discover vivid pictures of how they provided a discursive space where writers could experiment with subject positions denied to them in reality and allowed them the opportunity to reflect upon their lives and take ideological positions. I propose a reading of these poetic writings as a sub-genre of friendship poetry. Such an approach will elucidate how gentry women used this poetic venue to consolidate mutual interests with the like-minded, achieve imaginative self-realization, modify definitions of femininity, and create and develop a distinctly female literary tradition.¹

While studying women’s friendship poetry, I encountered two sharp contrasts. On the one hand, the rarity of depictions of female friendship in male-authored classical Chinese literature contrasts with the large repertory of stories, poems, and plays on and about friendship between men. On the other hand, the silence regarding female friendship in the (male) literati tradition is loudly contradicted in poetry by gentry women.

Traditionally, literati discourses favor a male-oriented reading of friendship. Friend, or *you* 友, was often associated with Confucian scholars and teachings.² *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, an analytical dictionary of Chinese characters

¹ Much research has been done in the field of British women’s friendship poetry as an established sub-genre initiated in the seventeenth century and developed in the following centuries. For examples of anthologies of English poems exchanged between women, see Donoghue. Paula R. Backscheider devoted a whole chapter of her book to discussing the development and significance of women’s friendship poetry in eighteenth-century Britain. See Backscheider 175-232. Scholarship on late imperial Chinese women’s literature and culture also examines the expansion of gentry women’s social sphere and the consequent development of women’s association across space. The scholarship is exemplified by Dorothy Ko’s historical examination of poetry clubs formed by seventeenth-century gentry women writers and Grace Fong’s investigation of female discursive communities established through anthologizing. See Ko; Fong 121-58. Beata Grant explores the friendships illustrated in poems that gentry women exchanged with Buddhist nuns in the seventeenth century. See Grant 215-48.

² A much quoted definition of *you* in *Erya* 爾雅, the first extant Chinese dictionary compiled in third century B.C.E., says: “Treating one’s brothers nicely is to be *you*” ‘善兄弟為友.’ See Guo Pu 郭璞; Xing Bing 邢昺 19:250. This definition confirms the gendered nature of *you*. As noted by Martin Huang

composed in the second century CE, defines *you* as those who share common aspirations (同志爲友) (Xu 65). *Liji* 禮記 (*The Book of Rites*) elaborates on this definition and designates friends of a Confucian scholar as those “with whom he agrees in aim, and pursues the same objects, with whom he cultivates the same course, and that by the same methods” (Legge 28:408-09). Friendship in Confucianism was, therefore, assigned an elevated status and was often a defining relationship in the public sphere reserved for men.³ On the contrary, in rare cases when male literati did acknowledge friendship between women, the semantic meaning and syntactic usage of *you* was deliberately limited and slanted to avoid the elevated moral connotation that it conveyed in a male context. Beata Grant has observed that two male compilers of *Chidu xinyu* 尺牘新語 (*Modern letters*) categorize the friends of Shen Hui 申惠 (courtesy name Lanfang 蘭芳), a seventeenth-century woman poet, into four groups: poetry friends, painting friends, calligraphy friends, and Chan-discussing friends (219-20). The modifying phrases in front of “friend” defensively justify Shen’s friendships with other women, as poetry, painting, calligraphy, and Chan discussing were often not only tolerated but also encouraged in gentry families. Although these qualifying phrases elevate the roles of the women above those defined by kinship and domestic duties, they fail to acknowledge any moral implications or affective dimensions of women’s friendship.

Ranked last in the five cardinal relationships, friendship differs from the other four as it is non-hierarchical and creates the potential to traverse the boundary between family and court, allowing for human relationships beyond kinship and political subordination. While the other four cardinal relationships were usually formed arbitrarily and endured without one’s consent, friendship celebrated shared aspirations and mutual recognition of moral righteousness, featured mutual selection and agreement, and granted more agency. Friendship was often reserved for men in traditional Chinese society due to the restriction of women’s mobility and their exclusion from public affairs. It actively contributed to the construction of Confucian masculinity. Based on mutual recogni-

in his important article on male friendship in Ming China, it is critical to be aware of the historical development of the concept of *you* and the differences between the concept and its modern English equivalent. Before the emergence of nuclear families as basic social units during the Spring and Autumn Period, *you* is a concept referring to a relationship between male kinsmen rather than one outside a lineage. At the same time, different from the modern concept of friendship, male friendship in imperial China was conceived more as a public matter. See Huang 2-33.

³ In the same article on male friendship, Martin Huang pointed out that in late imperial China friendship was often viewed with suspicion and considered as a potential threat to the core Confucian values prioritizing state and family. However, it was still justified by common aspirations of righteousness.

tion of the right Confucian ways, friendship between men helped to define their identities as Confucian scholars whose moral integrity entitled them to positions in the public sphere. In some cases, friendship was even hailed as the origin of morality:

When Heaven and Earth became friends, the universe came into being. When the sun and the moon became friends, everything on earth was illuminated. When the wind and the rain became friends, grasses and trees flourished. When gentlemen became friends, morals were accomplished. (Sima Guang 12)

天地相友，萬彙以生。日月相友，羣倫以明。風雨相友，艸木以榮。君子相友，道德以成。(my translation)⁴

Therefore, a gentleman could not assert his moral influence until he became a friend of the like-minded. Friends served as mirrors in which a male scholar established and reinforced his social, moral, and sexual identities.

In contrast, friendship did not play as crucial a role in the social construction of femininity. Restricted physical mobility reduced the opportunities for women to become acquainted with other women outside their families. Femininity was socially defined when women played the roles of mothers, daughters, and wives. As a social construct, femininity was contingent on women's relations to men instead of among themselves. Even though the regulations of women's conduct and the advocacy of model women did attest to female participation in the construction of social norms, the impact of female influence was often made visible mostly through women's interaction with the male. From the seventeenth century on, social and economic changes enabled some gentry women to have freedom in associating with women outside the family. Women's friendship poems contributed to the establishment and development of this relationship between women.

A close reading of poems exchanged between female friends allows contemporary readers to understand how these writings participated in the revision of femininity by constructing a gendered self within a web of human relations inside and outside of patriarchal families. The discourse on friendship as constructed in gentry women's poetry is part of a larger discourse on intimacy between women. In rare cases where women's intimacy is depicted in male literati's works, the attachments and desires are always re-directed to and re-framed in heterosexual norms. Li Yu's 李漁 (1611-1680) play *Lian xiang ban* 憐香伴 (*Loving Fragrance Companion*) and Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) story "Feng san niang" 封三娘 ("Lady Feng") provide interesting examples. In both stories, a woman falls in love with another woman. In order to perpetuate their

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

relationship, one convinces the other to marry her husband.⁵ It is understandable as it might be the only plausible solution in reality. In contrast, gentry women's friendship poems construct a space where they explore their subjectivity and experiment with lyric expression of such affections.

Women wrote friendship poetry for pragmatic reasons. As exemplified by the poems examined below, many gentry women wrote poetic epistles or attached poems to their letters to friends. Some women wrote friendship poems to become acquainted with other writers or to bid farewell to their friends; some to mourn a friend's passing, to celebrate meetings with friends, or simply to present poems as gifts. Others wrote poetic dedications to their friends' collected writings. A nuanced study of how these women viewed and constructed their roles as friends of other women will shed light on women's conception of self-identities and on their effort to re-inscribe subjectivities distinct from the representation of women in (male) literati discourse. In the first section, I will investigate the impact of the immediate audience on the distinctive features of women's friendship poetry and explore the poetic devices employed by these women to achieve innovative subject positions. The second section examines different kinds of female friendship as represented in poems exchanged between two pairs of friends: Wang Duan 汪端 (courtesy name Yunzhuang 允庄, 1793-1838) and Gui Maoyi 歸懋儀 (courtesy name Peishan 佩珊, 1765-?); and Ji Lanyun 季蘭韻 (courtesy name Xiangjuan 湘娟, 1793-c.1848) and Wu Moxiang 吳墨香.

Audience and Rhetoric in Women's Friendship Poetry

When gentry women sought to experiment with female friendship in lyric poetry, they resorted to literati discourse on elevated friendship between the like-minded Confucian scholars and on heterosexual love. Women's friendship poetry, therefore, features two characteristics: clearly articulated identities of both the addresser and the addressee as writers, and the use of rhetoric traditionally found in male-authored love poetry.

Friendship served as a social capital for male scholars, and was also an important source of emotional satisfaction. With the gradual expansion of women's social spheres in late imperial China, women writers appropriated the rhetoric of male friendship to create a poetic discourse on the virtues and possibilities

⁵ See Tze-lan Sang's discussion on male literati's "silence" on the subject of female homosociality/homosexuality, 37-95.

of friendship between women. Interestingly, mutual acknowledgement of each other as writers brings women's friendship in late imperial China closer to the modern conceptualization of friendship. Allan Silver points out that modern friendship is "grounded in the unique and irreplaceable qualities of partners, defined and valued independently of . . . any publicly defined status" and emphasizes intimacy and the private sphere (1476-77). Chinese gentry women writers celebrated friendships by writing poems, which provided them with a discursive space to confide their inner selves to their friends, an intimacy which in other places could have been regarded as inappropriate.

In women's friendship poetry, there exists what Dorothy Ko observed as a "friendship-love continuum" based on the frequent employment of dictions and images commonly found in poems on heterosexual love (266). Because women's friendship lacked a publicly acknowledged ethical dimension and social efficacy, the writers had to create one by appropriating the repertory available to them. When women writers endeavored to create the identity for themselves as another woman's friend, the heterosexual love model appealed to them for various reasons. Usually beginning or ending within a family, this model gives the writer and the reader of a friendship poem easier access to identification. It allows the poets to perform socially sanctioned femininity while creating a new poetic identity. Also, the affective dimension, physical intimacy, and emotional reciprocity of this model often conformed to women's experiences with their friends in the inner chambers. Consequently, in writing practice diction and imagery from the heterosexual love model provide gentry women with an opportunity to simultaneously perform and modify femininity by experimenting with a socially acceptable discourse and thereby acquire an ethical dimension and cultural efficacy.

The following poem by Jiang Shuze 江淑則 (courtesy name Langxian 闌仙, 1826-1852) to a girlhood companion illustrates the features mentioned above. The first stanza says:

Ever since I married, I have been feeling pent up and am never in the mood for writing poetry. A girlhood friend (literally "friend from the inner chambers") of mine sent me poems inquiring about my current situation, and in reply I composed [the following poems] using the same rhyming characters.

余自於歸后襟懷結轡，無心詞翰。有閨友以詩來訊近況者，次韻御寄。

(1)

Looking back over my life, I feel only pity for myself:
A bout of melancholy, stirred feelings, and endless regret.
Only now do I see that talent is actually not a blessing;
And that to enjoy pure leisure is by itself divine.

My clueless soul has fled and vanished in my dreams;
 While my pure tears continue to fall in front of the lamp.
 Other people should cease being so jealous of my fame:
 For my heart is like ash that will never flame up again. (1231)

(一)

回首平生只自憐
 一番悵觸恨綿綿
 從知才調原非福
 得佔清閑便是仙
 已分痴魂鎖夢裡
 尚餘清淚落燈前
 旁人休把聲名妒
 我已心灰不復燃

In this lyric reply to an inquiry from her girlhood companion, Jiang Shuze depicts the conflict she experiences as a writer and a busy wife. From the prefaces of her collection *Duqingge shi ci chao* 獨清閣詩詞鈔 (*Shi and Ci Poems from Pure-Alone-Chamber*) and her biography in *Guixiu cihua* 閨秀詞話 (*Remarks on ci Poetry by Talented Women*), we know that Jiang was a talented woman for her time, who from an early age was well-known for her poetry and painting in the local area of Changshu in today's Jiangsu province. She married at the age of twenty-one and died four years later from post-partum complications.⁶

Like many gentry women writers in late imperial China, Jiang Shuze addressed this poem to her “friend from the inner chambers.” The address first refers to the locus of women's association with respect to their social class and indicates that they developed their relationships with women of similar backgrounds, within an appropriate space, secluded and socially sanctioned. The term can also mean girlhood friends, as for many women writers, there was a watershed between girlhood and married life. Much biographical information available on gentry women writers suggest that young girls were often taught and encouraged by their natal families to engage in artistic activities such as reading, writing, and painting. In contrast, as adults they were usually burdened with chores, raising children, caring for their husbands' families, and managing the household—especially during the years before their children reached adulthood. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand the frequent yearning for girlhood days expressed in these writings. Consequently, girlhood friendship is always emotionally loaded.⁷

⁶ Lei Jin 雷璿 4.3b.

⁷ It is noteworthy that many women chose not to identify their friends in poem titles, a phenomenon that stands in sharp contrast with poems exchanged between literati friends. In literati friendship poetry, it is a norm to identify the friend in the title understandably because friendship between men had the

In the second line, the character *hen* 恨 sets the tone for Jiang Shuze's poetic epistle. Though usually translated as regret, *hen* in this context refers to a resentment caused by an unchangeable situation beyond one's control. Jiang resents her disappointing life which was totally different from the one in her natal family and the one she had expected. She laments her inability to paint or compose poetry due to lack of time and constant illness. Her depiction of anger and bitterness does not comply with orthodox poetic aesthetics, which advocate against expressions of excessive feelings in poetry. Confucius praises a poem from *Shi jing* 詩經 (*The Book of Poetry*) because "there is joy without wantonness, and sorrow without self-injury" '樂而不淫，哀而不傷'.⁸ The popular saying from *The Analects* later becomes the catch phrase for orthodox aesthetics, which promotes a poetics of balance and moderation. Jiang's poetic letter to her girlhood companion provides a safe place to complain and express her true feelings about her current situation. Once a talented poet who won a reputation at an early age and whose talent was appreciated and nurtured by her natal family, Jiang might have experienced a sharp contrast between her girlhood life devoted to creative activities and her married one occupied by reproductive responsibilities and domestic chores. She may have become more aware of the impossibility to achieve further accomplishments beyond her reputation as a "talented woman." Her physical situation and mental dilemma result in the abandonment of her writing brush and a mind chaotic described in the second stanza of this poem as "a tangle of silk threads." It is only her girlhood companion—the immediate reader of the epistle, a writer who writes "jade-like" poems, and a sympathetic audience and friend who knows her well enough to understand her anxiety and feelings—who finally moves her to write the reply.

Compared to British women's friendship poetry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Chinese gentry women writers' roles as friends are frequently associated with their identities as writers and, therefore, sympathetic readers. The following poems exchanged between Yang Yuxiang 楊雨香 (fl. before 1833) and Hong Jingtong 洪井桐 (fl. before 1833) further exemplify the poetic creation of the identity of a sympathetic poet-reader friend. In the

capacity to signify socially and culturally. As a male literatus' identity was publically sanctioned and contingent on public circulation, identifying a friend might allow the poet to capitalize on his friend's cultural standing, social status or connections. Many women writers, however, left their friends anonymous when the poems circulated in public. It is probably not only meant to protect their friends, but that the identification of a woman in a poem written by another woman could often fail to signify, since women's identities were usually determined by their roles within a patriarchal family and women's friendship lacked in publically acknowledged virtues.

⁸ See He Yan 何晏 3:20/29. For translation, see Lau 70.

beginning of Yang Yuxiang's "A poetic letter to my friend from the inner chambers Hong Jingtong, composed after I rise from illness on an autumn's day" '秋日病起簡閨友洪井桐,' the poet depicts a young lady in her chamber lamenting her emaciated figure caused by illness. The last couplet then characterizes the speaking self as a poet and a devoted friend: "Pulling on my clothes, I spend a moment plucking a *wutong* leaf. / Cricket chirping from all corners randomly moves me to write of my feelings" '披衣小立裁桐葉 / 亂觸吟情四壁蛩,' (14.13a-b). The "*wutong* leaf" alludes to the well-known poem "*Shu Tongye*" 書桐葉 ("Written on a Tung Leaf") by Ren shi 任氏 (fl. tenth century), a Tang woman poet. In the Tang poems, the speaking self writes the word of "*xiang si*" 相思 (lovesickness) on a *wutong* leaf and wishes for the leaf to fly up with the autumn wind and find a man who would understand its true meaning. (8994-95)

Alluding to the Tang poem, Yang Yuxiang echoes the earlier poet's sentiment of entrusting her thoughts to poetic lines written on a *wutong* leaf. This allusion conjures the image of a woman writer holding a writing brush, sad with something weighing on her mind. The two voices, however, have different concerns. The Tang poet is concerned about her destiny in a heterosexual relationship. Having written the characters of longing on a leaf, she worries if her message will be appreciated and cherished by a (male) lover. Similarly, the central image of a *wutong* leaf taken by the wind also reminds a sympathetic reader that the speaking voice has no control of her destiny in her love life. In Yang's poem, the speaker conveys her regret for a lonely night while ill and her longing for her friend. The poet's description of her physical condition is intended to underscore her yearning for her friend rather than lovesickness. The image of the *wutong* leaf thus assists in constructing the writer-friend identity of the speaking voice through appropriating the traditional image of earlier women writers and the rhetoric of heterosexual love relationship.

Yang's poetic construction of a poet-reader friend is echoed and reinforced by Hong Jingtong's reply. After acknowledging the receipt of Yang's message, Hong sympathizes with her friend's illness and praises her poem. She elaborates on her appreciation of Yang's poem, applauding its enlightening and refreshing lines. She then introduces her own effort as a writer with her poetic reply in the last two lines. (14.13b)

The close association of the identity of friend and the identity of sympathetic writer-reader in gentry women's friendship poetry was not unusual. This association gestures toward writing as a textual space where women writers can defy their lack of physical mobility in order to extend their friendship with their companions from the inner chambers, or to reach out and make new friends. The textual space offers a safe quarter for women to aestheticize and exchange

their physical and emotional experiences, consolidate the value of these experiences, and explore possibilities of self-identities from which they were traditionally excluded. In these poems, gentry women writers have fewer limitations on diction, topic, and mood. As a result, their poems can be surprisingly refreshing and innovative with imagery and tone. The following poem by Zhang Fan 張繫 (courtesy name Caiyu 采于, fl. late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries), a Qing poet and playwright is one such example.

My friend from the inner chamber asked me to write a poem on her fragrant handkerchief.
I playfully presented her with the following lines.

閨友出袖中香帕索詩戲贈

Your new silk handkerchief is purer than frost.

Yet I smeared it with lines in my unchained calligraphy.

No wonder the dense mist lingers long on the handkerchief:

Fragrance of ink flowers mingles with sweet smell of orchids. (6.6b)

新裁紈素潔於霜

眞草淋漓抹幾行

怪底氤氳長不散

墨花相間麝蘭香

The poet teasingly describes her own calligraphy written on her friend's handkerchief, a personal and feminine item. In Zhang Fan's light-hearted poetic depiction of an everyday episode, the handkerchief with the fragrance of her ink becomes a token of her friendship.

Women writers also address friends as *tongren* 同人 (person with same aspirations) or *tongmeng* 同盟 (alliance) in their poetry. Ushered into a discursive space where traditional images of the inner chambers are mingled with new activities, *tongren* and *tongmeng* introduce a genteel femininity based on shared interests in reading, writing, and creating a female writing tradition, and founded on mutual support through sharing life experience and consolidating their values as imaginative beings. *Tongren* and *tongmeng* testify to women's agency in selecting and solidifying their relations with the like-minded. In a poem to her friend Xi Huiwen 席慧文 (courtesy name Yishan 怡珊), Tang Xianglü 湯湘綠 (courtesy name Xiujian 秀娟, fl. late eighteenth and early nineteenth century) analogizes their friendship to "clouds above water swearing alliance with white gulls (438)." Tang tells her readers how she was delighted with a letter from her friend who was traveling. She admires and celebrates Xi's precious chance of traveling and the poetic inspirations gained from the experience: "Visiting mountains and rivers, you pride yourself on glorious scenery. / Heaven lets the feminine and beautiful express strong emotions in poetry" '人覽山川夸眼福 / 天教脂粉壯詩情' (*ibid.*). The two phrases in the line, "the feminine and beautiful"

(*zhifen* 脂粉, literally “rouge and facial powder”) and “[to express] strong emotions in poetry” (*zhuang shiqing* 壯詩情) are commonly believed as incompatible. The style of “the feminine and beautiful” was often used to describe the sentimentality in women’s poems, using clichéd images associated with women in the inner chambers. As a metonym for women, “rouge and facial powder” was often employed to criticize “weak” styles of women’s poetry. In Tang’s poem, however, “rouge and facial powder” strengthens rather than weakens the poet’s vigorous imagination. The juxtaposition of the negatively-associated, gendered term with *zhuang* 壯 (to strengthen), a verb usually associated with masculinity, is not only an acknowledgement of her friend’s poem but a powerful renunciation of bias against women’s poetry in general. Thus, the bonding between Tang and her friend is based on sharing life experience, their mutual commitment to poetry, and similar artistic tastes.

The Spectrum of Women’s Friendship: Two Case Studies

Women’s friendship poetry represents a wide spectrum of friendship between gentry women. As a human relation, friendship varies between different individuals in different historical periods. Consequently, poetic representations of this relation differ from and are greatly impacted by numerous factors varying from social discourse on friendship and the poetic tradition to personal experience and writing skills. For example, Ji Lanyun intensifies her borrowing of love poetry to express more intimate and strong affection in a domestic and routine context in her poems addressed to Wu Moxiang, wife of a cousin of Ji’s husband and the biological mother of Ji’s adopted son. On the contrary, poems exchanged between Wang Duan and Gui Maoyi represent a more polite and less intense feeling based on reciprocity and mutual commitment to poetry. A comparative study of poems exchanged between the two pairs of friends illustrates the wide spectrum of this relation in its poetic representations.

More than forty poems from Ji’s poem collection were addressed to Wu. Judging from these poems, which are chronologically arranged, the two women became friends when Ji adopted Wu’s son after Ji’s husband passed away, leaving her childless. Developing from sympathy and gratitude, the attachment between the friends was strengthened by their mutual responsibilities as mothers, shared interest in poetry, and time spent together in the inner chambers. In these poems, Ji recorded expectations for their mutual son, the serene happiness when they sat side by side on a rainy night, the grief when Wu could not visit her as

promised, and the great sorrow when her friend died. Their friendship features a strong desire for physical closeness, compassion, and reciprocity in everyday life. In her poems, Ji described their yearning for each other despite the fact that they lived in the same town. According to Ji, Wu also expressed the regret over their physical separation. In the last stanza of a poem addressed to Moxiang entitled “I entrust my feelings and random thoughts to Moxiang on a spring day” ‘春日雜感寄懷墨香,’ Ji says:

Quietly I miss you on the dimly discernible tower afar,
Touched by the silkworms who turn red when mature.
Passionately we desire to be two silkworms making one cocoon.
Yet when it will be achieved is still unknown.

[Poet’s note: Moxiang wanted to fulfill Xiang Ping’s wish as early as possible and move to live with me.] (6.2b)

縹緲樓台思悄然
紅蠶怪底太纏綿
痴心欲作同功繭
不識功成在甚年

[墨香欲早了向平之願，與余同居]

Xiangping’s wish in the poet’s note alludes to Xiang Chang 向長 (courtesy name Ziping 子平), a famous recluse of the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220). After his children married, Xiang Chang left home and traveled with his friend to famous mountains. Later, “Xiang Ping’s wish” is often used to refer to the lifted responsibility as a parent. Ji Lanyun obviously recognized the unusual yearning for each other between the friends and used the character *chi* 痴 (literally “infatuation” or “obsession”) in many places including in this poem to describe the mutual attachment. The obsession of physical closeness in the above poem is also highlighted by the image of two silkworms within one cocoon, an image that further complicates the poetic representation of their friendship: as the poet intimates in the second line of the stanza, the silkworms making a cocoon have already reached maturity. The cocoon symbolizes their common son, a tight bonding between the two women and a mutual achievement, as well as a shared burden that also limits the life choices of the two mothers.

In other places, Ji also employs the word *chi* to describe the bonding between the friends. In a poem reciprocating Wu’s gift of a jade bracelet in the shape of bamboo root, Ji Lanyun celebrates their companionship, saying: “Of one heart we vowed to accompany each other from now on. / Biting arms, for companionship in the next life we also obsessively swore” ‘同心喜訂今生伴 / 噬臂痴聯隔世盟’ (4.14b-15a). The couplet highlights the intimacy between the friends by introducing the image of sworn marriage by biting arms, alluding to the story of Meng Ren 孟任 (fl. late seventh century B.C.E.) and King Zhuang

of Lu (706-662 B.C.E.). According to the historiography, Meng Ren and King Zhuang swore an oath of marriage by cutting their arms (Zuo 1:79).

Furthermore, the strong emotions indicated by the allusion to Meng Ren and King Zhuang of Lu and the description of deep appreciation violate the orthodox poetic aesthetics against expressions of excessive feelings. The poet herself seems to be conscious of the transgression. In a poem entitled "On my feelings to Moxiang while watching water lilies" 對蓮寄懷墨香, Ji says: "The water lilies smile, as if knowing my mind. / My affection for her is strong as lotus root silks. / Friendship between worthy people should be moderate and detached. / No wonder the flowers laugh at my excessive feelings of the inner chambers" 芙蓉含笑儼相知 / 人意纏綿似藕絲 / 君子之交原合淡 / 閨情未免被花嗤' (4.14b). In contrast to the passionate friendship between Ji Lanyun and Wu Moxiang, Wang Duan's friendship with Gui Maoyi is more reserved and distant, typical of relations between learned gentry women who became acquainted with each other on casual occasions.

More than one third of the poems in Wang Duan's *Ziranhaoxuezhai shichao* 自然好學齋詩鈔 (*Collected Poems from Innate Love of Learning Studio*, hereafter *Innate Love*) were exchanged with contemporary women writers. In her study of seventeenth-century Chinese women and culture, Dorothy Ko argues that women's networks during this historical period were mostly made up of family members or established through expanded sympathetic readings of each other's writings without face-to-face interaction (202-14). Wang Duan's era, about two hundred years later than the historical period described by Ko, witnessed a community of gentry women that was more consciously and actively constructed, sought, and expanded beyond female family members and through face-to-face contact. In the case of Wang Duan and Gui Maoyi, their acquaintance and friendship were made possible by two factors. As a "teacher of the inner chambers" (*guishushi* 閨塾師), Gui Maoyi had greater physical mobility than most women, since she traveled between her hometown and her patrons' families. According to Tao Shu's 陶澍 (1779-1839) preface to her collected poems *Xiuyu xucuo wujuan* 繡余續草五卷 (*Continuation of Drafts after Embroidering: Five Chapters*), during her later years Gui was invited by many families to mentor their female family members. Gui's own poetic works attest to extensive travel in the Wu area, serving as a teacher for daughters and sisters of local gentry families in order to make a living for herself and her family. Around 1809, she traveled from Shenjiang,⁹ where she and her husband lived, to the Wu area

⁹ Modern day Shanghai.

and met Wang Duan in Suzhou. Their meeting was also facilitated by Wang Duan's extensive association with other writers from her and her husband's families, which boasted of prominent men and women writers including Liang Desheng 梁德繩 (courtesy name Chusheng 楚生, 1771-1847), Wang's maternal aunt and renowned poet and novelist, and Chen Wenshu 陳文述 (1771-1843), Wang's father-in-law and a well-established writer and advocate of women's writings.

In the poems exchanged between Wang Duan and Gui Maoyi, the identities of the feminine voices as talented writers, appreciative readers, and literary friends are generated, developed, and fortified. Fourteen poems from the second and third chapters of Wang Duan's collection reveal her acquaintance and friendship with Gui Maoyi. Because the poems in *Innate Love* are chronologically arranged, it can be inferred from their locations in the collection that Wang and Gui met for the first time shortly after Wang was married in 1810 and that they lost contact sometime after the year 1817.¹⁰ However, their written communication began even before 1810. In the second chapter of her collected works, four poems by Wang Duan on historical figures can be found as replies to Gui's poems.¹¹

Wang's poem on her first meeting with Gui is pivotal to our understanding of how gentry women writers in this historical period endeavored to legitimize their identities as writer-friends through creating a discursive space in which they negotiated, empowered, and expanded their gendered writing positions and subjectivity. To a certain extent, the poem is also Wang's attempt to create a poetic history of a fellow woman writer and the mutual friendship the two enjoyed. The poem includes four stanzas and is entitled "Madame Gui Peishan (Maoyi) of Qinhe¹² visited my White Ring Bellflower Studio. Drinking wine with incense burning, we talked amiably for the whole night. She even kindly showed me her *Drafts Written After Embroidering: Continuation*. I respectfully wrote four seven-character-line regulated stanzas on the first page of her collection in reply to her poems presented to me as gifts" 琴河歸佩珊夫人(懋儀)過

¹⁰ Wang's last poem addressed Gui and her work appears right before the dated poem: "On the seventh day of the first lunar month of the year of Dingchou (1817), I composed the poem moved by recalling the past days" 丁丑入日感舊作. See Wang 3.11b. Gui's poems presented to Wang collected in *Xiuyu xucao wujuan* are not dated.

¹¹ For the four poems, see Wang Duan, "On Four Distinguished Historical Figures, Matching Rhymes to Those on a Similar Topic by Madame Gui from Qinhe" 詠古四首和琴河佩珊夫人, 1.1b-2a. For Gui's poems on the same topics, see Gui Maoyi, "Earl of Qin" 秦伯, "Marquise of Huaiyin" 淮陰侯, "Scholar Jia" 賈生, "Marquise of Wu" 武侯, and "Loyal Marquise of Yue" 岳忠侯, *Xiuyuxucao fu Tingxuejuan ci* 續余續草附聽雪軒詞 679-80.

¹² Today's Changshu of Jiangsu province.

余白環花閣，酌酒焚蘭，言歡竟夕，且出示所著繡余續草。因書四律於卷首，奉答見贈之作。’ Hereafter “Madame Gui Peishan (Maoyi) of Qinhe visited my White Ring Bellflower Studio” (2.16a-b). The four stanzas are carefully arranged chronologically, with each stanza focusing on a different aspect of the addressee’s life, her poetic achievements, and the friendship between her and the writer. The poem consists of selected imagined moments of Gui’s life until her meeting with the writer: The first stanza begins with the writer’s speculation on Gui’s previous life, and the fourth stanza ends when the friends meet for the first time. These moments introduce a temporal dimension so that the poem can be read as Wang Duan’s attempt to create a poetic biography for her friend.

In this poem, all imagined moments of Gui’s life are associated with her artistic activities. In the first stanza, for example, Wang represents Gui as an immortal living in the legendary Ten Islets. The two parallel lines of the second couplet describe Gui’s new chamber in Hangzhou on a spring day and her former splendid residence in Qinhe where her natal family lived. The two locations are significant because, in Wang Duan’s imagination, they are where Gui composes and chants poems. In the third stanza, Wang laments Gui’s financial predicament, a condition that, nevertheless, testifies to her friend’s poetic talent and moral integrity. The fifth line of the same stanza overtly alludes to Gui’s poem series on a crane collected in her *Xiu yu xiao cao* 繡余小草 (*A Few Drafts After Embroidering*) under the title of “Here Fly the Cranes” 鶴飛來 (Gui 651). These moments in the poems serve to acknowledge Gui’s identity as a distinguished poet and in turn consolidate the speaking voice as belonging to an understanding and sympathetic fellow writer.

This poem by Wang Duan constructs a space where the bonds of friendship between the two women writers are strengthened through the poet’s acknowledgement of Gui’s familial literary legacy. The second stanza is completely devoted to tracing Gui’s female literary genealogy. After admiring Gui’s noble natal family in the first two lines, Wang says:

Surviving bookworms, poems in ink shine as brilliant pearls.

([Poet’s note:] Madame Li, Madame Gui’s mother wrote *Poetry that Survived Bookworms*)

蠹餘遺墨珠璣麗

([自注] 君母李夫人著有蠹餘吟草)

Newly completed, the precious volume is fragrant as orchids.

([Poet’s note:] Madame Yang, Madame Gui’s mother-in-law, composed the *Collection of Precious Volume Tower*)

鴻寶新編蕙芷芳

([自注] 君姑楊夫人著有鴻寶樓集)

Wen Shu's reputation for talent is side by side with that of Lu Qingzi.¹³

文淑才名並卿子

Shen Wanjun passed her family learning to Ye Qiongzhang.¹⁴

宛君家學授瓊章

A long tradition exists within the doors of the inner chambers,

閨門自有淵源在

Not solely because you offered your earnest respect to Master Xiaocang.¹⁵

不獨心香奉小倉

In the three couplets quoted above, Gui Maoyi's literary legacy is compared to that of two pairs of women writers from earlier generations—Wen Shu and her mother-in-law Lu Qingzi, and Shen Yixiu and her daughter Ye Qiongzhang. This analogy leads to the conclusion in the following line: Gui Maoyi's talent and achievement in poetry are described as part of a family tradition “within the inner chambers.” That Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1779), the famous Qing dynasty literatus, was Gui's mentor has been addressed emphatically by Gui and other writers in their dedicatory poems and prefaces appearing at the beginning of Gui's collections. The last line of the stanza, however, suggests that Gui's literary achievements may be more influenced by the female mentors in her family than by Yuan Mei. Wang Duan's unambiguous partiality to the maternal literary heritage is bold, especially considering the fact that Chen Wenshu, her father-in-law, like Yuan Mei, saw himself as a mentor to his women disciples. Through the comparisons between Gui Maoyi, her maternal mentors, and her female literary predecessors to their counterparts in earlier generations, Wang creates a space that accommodates and validates a distinctly female literary tradition.

It is important to notice that, elsewhere in her collection, Wang acknowledges her gratitude to her maternal aunt Liang Desheng, a distinguished poet and *tanci* 彈詞 fiction writer, for mentoring Wang in her literary education. In acknowledging Gui's literary inheritance from her female family members, Wang Duan establishes a bond between Gui and herself due to their similar familial and educational backgrounds. Wang empowers both writer and reader by creating a female writing tradition and a niche not only for themselves but for

¹³ Wen Shu 文淑 (fl. late sixteenth century) is Lu Qingzi's 陸卿子 (fl. mid-sixteenth century) daughter-in-law. Both are prominent writers and painters. By comparing Gui Maoyi and her mother to Wen Shu and Lu Qingzi, Wang Duan compliments the mother-in-law's and daughter-in-law's literary achievements and the rich literary tradition of the family of Gui's husband.

¹⁴ Shen Yixiu 沈宜修 (courtesy name Wanjun 宛君, 1590-1635) is Ye Xiaoluan's 葉小鸞 (courtesy name Qiongzhang 瓊章, 1616-1632) mother. Both mother and daughter are renowned poets. The other two daughters of Shen are also known for their talents in composing poems. By alluding to the mother and daughter of the Ye family, Wang Duan pays a tribute to Gui Maoyi's family learning.

¹⁵ Master Xiaocang refers to Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1779). Gui Maoyi is one of Yuan's women disciples.

other women writers in their families.

As a well-versed literary historian, Wang Duan is sympathetic to contemporary women writers and those from earlier generations. This sympathy plays a significant role in her poems about friendship with other women writers, including Gui Maoyi, in which she employs the prevailing rhetoric in describing talented women as doomed. This rhetoric allows her to create an inclusive circle where women's literary talent, fame, life experience, and writers' identity are connected and legitimated through interactions with each other. The inclusive circle is usually constructed with Wang's sincere compassion for the hardships and unfair treatment that her friends encounter. In the case of her poems to Gui Maoyi, Wang Duan reinforces Gui's writing identity and their friendship by drawing the boundary between "them" and "us." The fifth line in the first stanza of "Madame Gui Peishan (Maoyi) of Qinhe visited my White Ring Bell-flower Studio," for example, contrasts Gui's outstanding poetic talent with the mediocre, and accuses the latter for stifling the former when it is defied (拔俗詞華偏忤俗, 12a). Similarly, the sixth line of the third stanza criticizes the creeping weed's resentment of the fragrant orchid, using two metaphors that refer respectively to the mediocre "them" and the talented "us." In the subsequent couplet, Wang endeavors to comfort her friend who suffers from economic hardship and unhappy life experiences, pointing out that talented people and beautiful women have always suffered from hardship, generation after generation (鸞鳳無心憐瘦鶴 / 菘蕪何事妬芳蘭 / 才人自昔悲遭際 / 莫恨娥眉稱意難' (12a). The depictions of Gui's misfortune and vicissitudes only legitimate her literary talent and poetic achievement. At the same time, the poet further consolidates her bonding with Gui as a friend capable of sympathizing with her experience and appreciating her talent.

The bonds of friendship established in Wang Duan's poem exchanged with Gui Maoyi are expanded beyond the two friends. The poet pushes the boundary of the inclusive circle so that it also embraces other women writers of earlier or contemporary generations. In another poem entitled "Composed on an autumn night to send to Peishan" 秋夜寄佩珊, Wang writes:

You must be Huang Yuanjie in the former life,
 Committing to poems poor and sad days of declining years.
 Please take good care of yourself! These are the words I send to you,
 Since surviving talented women are so few!
 ([Poet's note:] I just heard of Madame Chenlan's¹⁶ obituary. 3.11a)

¹⁶ Madame Chenlan refers to Li Peijin 李佩金 (courtesy name Renlan 勿蘭, fl. early 19th century), the author of *Shengxiangguan ci* 生香館詞 (*Collection of ci Poetry by the Fragrant Hall*). Li's poem in-

前身合是黃皆令
 垂老窮愁托詠歌
 一語寄君需自愛
 掃眉才子已無多
 ([自注]近聞晨蘭夫人之訃)

In comforting, praising, encouraging, and caring for Gui Maoyi, Wang Duan introduces into this poem two women writers: Huang Yuanjie 黃媛介 (courtesy name Jieling 皆令, fl. seventeenth century) from an earlier generation, and Li Peijin 李佩金 (courtesy name Renlan 纫蘭, fl. early nineteenth century), a contemporary. Both were widely recognized women poets in their time. Similar to Gui, Huang Yuanjie also traveled while serving as a “teacher of the inner chambers” in order to earn a living in old age. In this circle of “talented women scholars” (*saomei caizi* 掃眉才子), the attachment between the two friends is extended as shared sympathy and salutation to all women writers.

Conclusion

It is important for us to contextualize our reading of the poems exchanged between gentry women within a larger social and literary tradition. This inquiry into women’s friendship poetry contributes to a better understanding of women’s friendship within the patriarchal society and how gentry women’s poetic discourse participated in the social construction of this human relationship. A thorough study of gentry women’s friendship poetry should include poems exchanged between friends, the prefaces women wrote for their friends, and anecdotes and comments which female critics, such as Wang Duanshu 王端淑 (1621-c.1706) and Shen Shanbao 沈善寶 (1808-1862), included in their anthologies of women’s poems or random notes on women’s poetry (*shihua* 詩話, sometimes also translated as “poetry talks”). Due to limitations in scope, the latter two were not examined in this essay. However, it is noteworthy that prefaces, anecdotes, and critical comments not only provide us with biographical information, but more importantly, represent a conscious endeavor of the women writers to create a mutually supportive and publicly acknowledged discourse on

scribed on a painting associated with Chen Wenshu is collected in *Xiaotanluanshi huiké guixiu ci* 小檀樂室匯刻閩秀詞. Wang Duan probably was acquainted with Li after she married into the Chen family. The poem which she wrote on Li’s collection can be found in *Ziranbaoxuezhai shichao*. See Wang Duan, “Inscribed at the Back of the *Collected Ci Poems by the Fragrant Hall* and Presented to Madame Li Chenlan” (題生香館詞后即呈琴河李晨蘭夫人), 2.14b. (Li Chenlan should be Li Renlan. *Chen* 晨 and *Ren* 纫 share the same pronunciation in *wu* dialect, which Wang Duan spoke.)

a relationship previously muted and unvalued, and consequently construct a literary tradition which is inclusive and nurturing.

Innovative subject positions constructed in gentry women's friendship poetry are contingent on each writer's attempts to establish, maintain, or develop friendships with other women. Their immediate audience allows gentry women's friendship poems a more dialogic parameter in the self-inscription of both the reader and the writer. These poems reveal how gentry women writers from this historical period could delineate a new subject position of being a friend to another woman. This subject position, achieved in the actual textual conversation of poems exchanged between women writers, illustrates how women could develop friendships with other women, how manuscripts were circulated among women writers and readers, how these writers created a collective identity that at the same time accommodated individual differences, how they fostered and developed a women's writing tradition, and how they viewed the interaction between this tradition and the dominant literati discourse.

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紅閨知己：明清時期的女性友誼詩歌

摘 要

友誼在士大夫話語中歷來有著鮮明的性別色彩。在中國古典文學的長河裏，描寫男性友誼的詩歌、小說和戲劇比比皆是，而女性之間友誼，雖然在男性文人的筆下極為鮮見，在閨秀詩歌中卻得到了充分的描寫。本文對十七至十九世紀中葉的女性友誼詩歌進行了文本細讀和分析，並發現友誼詩歌不但鞏固了閨秀詩人對彼此之間詩人身份的認同，還在一定程度上幫助她們在詩歌語境中實現自我價值，改寫女性的社會性別定義，進而創造和發展出獨特的女性文學傳統。

關鍵字：友誼，女性，主體性，明清，古典詩歌