

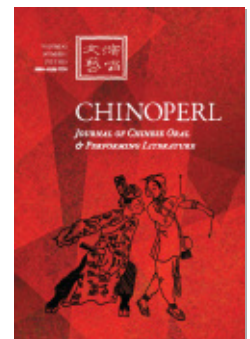


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Her Feet Hurt: Female Body and Pain in Chen Duansheng's
Zaisheng yuan (Destiny of Rebirth)

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HER FEET HURT: FEMALE BODY AND PAIN IN CHEN DUANSHENG'S ZAISHENG YUAN (DESTINY OF REBIRTH)

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This paper investigates the female writer Chen Duansheng's tanci fiction Zaisheng yuan, a story centered on a cross-dressed female protagonist. Evoking storytelling and stage performance, tanci fiction is a lengthy, rhymed narrative genre favored by female writers in the early modern Jiangnan region. This paper approaches Zaisheng yuan from the perspectives of gender and the senses to examine its representations of the female foot and pain. Zaisheng yuan repeatedly associates pain with the female practice of footbinding and spotlights the bound foot to address the female characters' distress and identity crisis. While the haptic-oriented descriptions of female feet speak to the gender stereotypes, through depicting both passive and active revealing of female feet, Zaisheng yuan demonstrates the emerging possibilities of female agency. In contrast to the male literary tradition, which treats the female body as a static spectacle, Zaisheng yuan endeavors to portray bound feet as an ongoing experience that causes pain from daily movements and calls for sympathetic audiences and mutual support from the female community. However, there are also times when the experience of pain, physical and especially psychological, cannot be shared, not only between genders but also between mothers and daughters, and this may indeed create obstacles to female companionship. To sum up, pain caused by bound feet provides a framework to shape the way women experienced the world, identified themselves, and interpreted the possibilities and limitations of their ways of living in early modern Chinese society.

KEYWORDS: *Zaisheng yuan*; *Destiny of Rebirth*; *tanci* fiction; footbinding; pain; female identity

Zaisheng yuan 再生緣 (Destiny of rebirth) is a twenty-volume (*juan* 卷) work of *tanci* 彈詞 (plucking rhymes) fiction written in the high Qing period (mid- to late-eighteenth century). Its female author, Chen Duansheng 陳端生 (1751–1796), was only able to write the first seventeen volumes (chapters 1–68) and was succeeded decades later by another female author, Liang Desheng 梁德繩 (1771–1841), who completed the story with three more volumes (chapters 69–80). Written in vernacular language and telling extremely long and convoluted narratives, *tanci* fiction, in general, received less attention from modern readers compared to other literary genres such as *zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小說 (novel in chapters) or *xiqu* 戲曲 (Chinese opera). The story *Zaisheng yuan*, however, is

an exception.¹ It is better recognized due to both its winding plot featuring female cross-dressing and the critical acclaim it received from leading Chinese intellectuals and authors in the early twentieth century,² as well as numerous on-screen modern adaptations for mass consumption.³

When reading *Zaisheng yuan* in its original format as a work of *tanci* fiction, it is hard to ignore the rich gender background this specific genre brings to the story. *Tanci* fiction—written primarily for reading rather than performance⁴—is a popular genre predominantly produced by female writers for a female readership during the nineteenth century in the geographic region of Jiangnan. This aspect of the genre is well documented in recent scholarship: Hu Siao-chen describes the establishment of the female community around *tanci* through creative writing, reading, commenting, editing, and writing sequels.⁵ Wilt Idema and Beata Grant also introduce the overall background of the genre with summaries of some representative works, describing *tanci* as catering to and engaged by elite women beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁶ Yu Zhang's monograph focuses on the family bonds and changing rhetorical boundaries in shaping *tanci* as a family-community-based genre.⁷ Li Guo underscores the issue of female agency and proposes the idea of a "female-oriented perspective" to discuss *tanci* in terms of both female writers and female protagonists,⁸ while her recent book adopts a spatialized approach to view female *tanci* writers' various negotiations "with the dominant cultural and political ideologies and systems of value in the Confucian society and of finding new means and venues of self-articulation," and argues that *tanci* as a narrative and artistic form facilitated vernacular imaginations and representations of gendered subjectivities.⁹

¹ *Zaisheng yuan* was considered the most widely circulated *tanci* fiction in both manuscripts and woodblock print versions from the Qing Dynasty to modern times. For a survey of the book history of *Zaisheng yuan*, see Li Kaixuan, "Zaisheng yuan xilie guige tanci yanjiu," pp. 21–24.

² See Chen Yinke, *Lun Zaisheng yuan*, and Guo Moruo, "Zaisheng yuan qian shiqi jian," pp. 854–81. Chen's book contains textual research on *Zaisheng yuan* and its author Chen Duansheng, while Guo's article praises *Zaisheng yuan* as having reached the same level of achievement as *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the red chamber).

³ Besides oral performances such as Peking opera or Suzhou *pingtan*, *Zaisheng yuan* was also made into various films and TV series (often with the title *Zaisheng yuan* or *Meng Lijun* 孟麗君), the earliest of which dates back to the Hong Kong film *Meng Lijun* (directed by Hong Zhonghao 洪仲豪 [1902–1963]) in 1938, while the most recent one is the Chinese TV series *Zaisheng yuan zhi Meng Lijun zhuan* 再生緣之孟麗君傳 (directed by Li Huiming 李惠民) in 2006. The multimedia afterlife of the text attests to the popularity of the story even to this day.

⁴ For a detailed discussion on the origin of *tanci* and *tanci* fiction, see Bao Zhenpei, *Qingdai nüzuojia tanci xiaoshuo lungao*, pp. 66–73. For a discussion on performance perspectives of *tanci* and Suzhou *tanci*'s modern take on *Zaisheng yuan*, see Bender, "Zaisheng Yuan" and "Meng Lijun," and his book *Plum and Bamboo*. In this article, I will focus on "tanci fiction," referring to those works written by female authors for silent reading instead of performance. However, as my later discussion shows, there are still traces of the oral literature remaining even in *tanci* fiction, including the rhymed language and continuous use of set phrases, which differentiate it from the other vernacular literature genres like *zhanghui xiaoshuo*. I propose to pay attention to those features to further investigate the connections between written text and its representation of sensory experience.

⁵ Hu Siao-chen, *Caimü cheye weimian*, pp. 23–32.

⁶ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, chapter 15 ("Plucking Rhymes"), pp. 717–63.

⁷ Zhang, *Interfamily Tanci Writing*, pp. xxvi–xxix.

⁸ Guo, *Women's Tanci Fiction*, p. 4.

⁹ Guo, *Writing Gender*, p. 3.

Whether discussing the genre in general or specific works including *Zaisheng yuan*, scholars tend to put its rich gender implications under the spotlight. Marina H. Sung situates *Zaisheng yuan* in the *lienü* 列女 (exemplary women) tradition and showcases the female protagonist's moral conflict between freedom and her gender obligations.¹⁰ Ellen Widmer pays special attention to *Zaisheng yuan*'s later editor Hou Zhi 侯芝 (1764–1829) and her didactic, Confucian rewriting of the story to pose questions of female talent in the late imperial era.¹¹ Focusing on the details in the story, Ying Zou shows how *Zaisheng yuan* reconfigures the narrative conventions and ideological meanings of cross-dressing from a women's perspective and how *tanci* allows such flexibility for female writers to play with the constraints.¹² Thus, existing scholarship demonstrates the extremely rich historical context and gender implications for both *tanci* fiction as a literary genre and *Zaisheng yuan* as a representative work of this genre.

Because many works of *tanci* fiction are centered on the daily lives and adventures of female protagonists, particularly subplots such as cross-dressing and refeminization, female authors often depict the appearances and movements of the female body in great detail, which is sometimes parallel with their own experience.¹³ Yet, we should not forget that women were not the only group who wrote about the female body or experience. Far from it—the majority of the texts about the female body, or more specifically, female feet, were produced by male literati.¹⁴ Dominating the discourse throughout premodern Chinese society, male literati not only set the terms and conditions of literary practice but also produced deeply entrenched conventions for depicting the female body. *Tanci* fiction, however, works in different ways to challenge these discursive conventions. Providing “fictional realism,”¹⁵ *tanci* fiction in a way deviates from the canon of premodern Chinese literature and therefore has the advantage of allowing female writers to form a conversation with those conventional standards and present a more original voice and point of view. Under the umbrella of *tanci* fiction, female writers manage to reveal different ways of experiencing the world when writing about topics of their own interest and catering to readers of the same gender. Writing about women for women lessens the burden of adhering to tradition and orients practice toward seeking empathy, companionship, and community. In this sense, *Zaisheng yuan* indeed benefits from its generic

¹⁰ Sung, “Narrative art of ‘Tsai-sheng-yüan’.”

¹¹ Widmer, *Beauty and the Book*, chapter 3 (“Hou Zhi and ‘Women’s *Tanci*’”), pp. 71–101.

¹² Zou, “Cross-Dressing and Other Disguises,” pp. 119–53.

¹³ It is a convention for female authors to document their own experience of writing the story in the opening and ending of each volume. Li Guo in her recent book argues for a spatialized reading that puts this information and the ongoing plot regarding the female protagonist in the story onto a horizontal axis and a vertical axis, respectively, which will help readers “envision the dynamism and interrelations between the authorial narrator and her implied readership, between textual vivacity and intertextual visions.” See Guo, *Writing Gender*, p. 11.

¹⁴ Dorothy Ko has a detailed discussion of how male literati talked about female bound feet. See Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters*. The whole book, except chapter 6, investigates all sorts of textual materials by male literati and revolutionists that present their views on the origin of, the obsession with, and the newly emerged detestation of female bound feet. There are also tons of male-authored works of fiction that help construct the image of the female body or even physical pain, among which the ones situated in the same late imperial context, such as *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (The plum in the golden vase) and *Jinghuayuan* 鏡花緣 (Flowers in the mirror), will be discussed in comparison later in this paper.

¹⁵ Guo, *Writing Gender*, p. 2.

freedoms and exemplifies a work that is particularly adept at articulating the distinctive experience of living as a woman in the early modern period.

The story of *Zaisheng yuan* centers on a female protagonist named Meng Lijun 孟麗君 who runs away from home cross-dressed as a man under the name Li Mingtang 酈明堂. Her intention is to avoid a forced marriage to Liu Kuibi 劉奎璧 and help her fiancé, Huangfu Shaohua 皇甫少華, regain power. Her maid and best friend Su Yingxue 蘇映雪, who is secretly in love with Huangfu Shaohua, attempts suicide when forced to marry Liu Kuibi. Luckily, she is saved and adopted by the chancellor's family, who renames her Liang Suhua 梁素華. Later, Meng Lijun passes the imperial exam as Li Mingtang, becomes prime minister, and even has a fake marriage with Su Yingxue/Liang Suhua. Up until this point, she has lived "her life" disguised as a man, and she refuses to admit publicly that she is actually the woman Meng Lijun. Eventually, the empress sets a trap to test Meng Lijun/Li Mingtang and exposes her female identity to the emperor, who has been secretly in love with her. The author Chen Duansheng stops at this point and leaves the critical question unanswered: will Meng Lijun/Li Mingtang give up her chastity and be the mistress of the emperor, give up her dream and go back to be Huangfu Shaohua's wife, or simply commit suicide? Later, Liang Desheng picks up the unfinished story and continues with the second possible ending: Meng Lijun returns to be the daughter of the Meng family and wife of Huangfu Shaohua, which yields a traditional happy reunion as expected in the majority of Chinese vernacular stories. While the trope of a cross-dressed female protagonist may not be unusual, especially in *tanci* fiction, the additional struggle Meng Lijun as well as other female characters undergoes when forced to choose between familial and social obligations makes this story a reflection of female anxieties rather than purely a fantasy. The vivid descriptions of sensory experience foreground the significance of the female body, as well as the successes and failures of these female characters' attempts to seize back control of their bodies and reconcile multiple identities.

One thing that truly distinguishes *Zaisheng yuan* from celebrated works of fiction by male literati authors is its extraordinary attention to the female body and bodily sensations, especially the combination of feet and pain.¹⁶ Its exquisite descriptions and plot designs reveal to us a female body that is nonerotic but feels and struggles, thus offering an in-depth view of what it is to be a woman both physically and mentally. Bound feet, as an emblem of ultimate femininity, function as the key that unlocks the protagonist's gender identity, as shown in the climax of the story in volume 17, the last volume written by Chen Duansheng. The repeated images of feet in *Zaisheng yuan* work as a useful guide for us to delve into the world of female sensory experience, imagination, and representations: on the one hand, the recurring descriptions of feet in *Zaisheng yuan* mediate and concretize the readers'

¹⁶ We might consider both the pain caused by footbinding and birthing to be female-exclusive, as determined by late imperial Chinese culture or human biological features. In fact, the pain accompanying giving birth was represented at great length in another work of *tanci* fiction by Qiu Xinru, *Bishenghua* 筆生花 (Blossoms from the brush), written after *Zaisheng yuan*. Unlike footbinding, giving birth is not normally considered erotic and attracts far less attention in the male literary tradition. Therefore, as a work authored by a female writer, *Zaisheng yuan*'s extraordinary attention to the pain caused by footbinding not only shows awareness of the culturally constructed image of women and womanhood but also an attempt to reread and reconstruct the female sensory image.

engagement with the world of female practices and imagination represented in the text; on the other hand, as a rather severe form of bodily modification, the bound feet are also a constant metonymic reminder and source of gendered pain and anguish. As Dorothy Ko has pointed out, footbinding was never a momentary action that happened once in a girl's childhood, but rather represented a lifelong process that required constant extra care and maintenance.¹⁷ And pain, whether physical or emotional, is entwined in the same temporality of experience: it not only acquires a strong sense of presence during the early days of practicing footbinding but also remains as a repeated experience that afflicts a woman throughout her life. Elaine Scarry in her book *The Body in Pain* articulates the peculiarities of physical pain, including extreme individuality, unsharability, and a strong resistance to language, which can be applied to the situation of footbinding. She argues that "[physical pain] achieves its aversiveness in part by bringing about . . . this absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons"¹⁸; therefore, the person in pain is "to have certainty" while the person hearing about pain is "to have doubt."¹⁹ Also, different from psychological suffering, which already has a great many representations in the literature that "stand by ready to assist us,"²⁰ physical pain "is not *of* or *for* anything" and thus "resists objectification in language."²¹ These arguments shed light on our approaches to the pain associated with footbinding as represented in works of *tanci* fiction like *Zaisheng yuan*, especially when questioning the subjects of pain and the effectiveness of expressing the pain to others. Thus, female author Chen Duansheng's writing on suffering female feet is interesting in the way that it seems to attempt to capture the feeling of physical pain using language while pondering the limits of pain being highly individual. Moreover, we should note that a wholly physical account of the pain of footbinding in female writings is unlikely. A strong tendency of late imperial women's writing to prioritize psychological suffering can be seen in writings around tragic figures such as Feng Xiaoqing 馮小青 (1595–1612) and the wives of Wu Wushan 吳吳山, especially the first two wives Chen Tong 陳同 (fl. 1650–1665) and Tan Ze 談則 (fl. 1665–1675).²² These women emotionally identified themselves with the protagonist Du Liniang 杜麗娘 from *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (The peony pavilion) and were thought to suffer an early death because of the cult of *qing*, which celebrated powerful emotions. Introducing a dream similar to Du Liniang's for one of the female protagonists, Chen Duansheng and her work *Zaisheng yuan* are aware of and engaged with this tradition in a creative way that portrays a dynamic relationship between female physical and psychological pain. In *Zaisheng yuan*, the female foot is not a passive object, but a vessel and medium for female subjectivity, senses, and sensibility. With such an emphasis, Chen Duansheng accentuates the corporeal body and visceral feelings as the foundations that differentiate genders and, more significantly, generations of the same gender. The body and its senses are what anchor our discussion of female authors' awareness of and dedication to

¹⁷ Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁸ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²² For a detailed account of Feng Xiaoqing, see Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chamber*, pp. 91–96. For a discussion on Wu Wushan and his three wives, see Zeitlin, "Shared Dreams," pp. 127–79.

representing a female-exclusive experience. Together, bound feet and the pain associated with the binding of feet form an essential part of female identity, which constantly undergoes questioning and transgression in *Zaisheng yuan*.

This paper delves into the world of female experience through a focused exploration of how *Zaisheng yuan* represents the female body and senses, especially women's feet and the pain associated with the binding of feet. Through textual analysis and engagement with the aforementioned scholarship on *Zaisheng yuan*, I intend to address the following questions: What does *Zaisheng yuan* tell us about how women in early modern Chinese society used their bodies and senses to experience, imagine, and represent the world they live in? Turning from bodily sensations in general to the sense of pain caused by the bound foot in particular, how do pain's physical and psychological dimensions interact, and how are those interactions represented and constructed both individually and collectively? Given Scarry's discussions about physical pain being unsharable, how does *Zaisheng yuan* utilize this feature to set up the relationships between characters while contributing new perspectives to flesh out the portrayal of female identity? Considering the fact that the text belongs to the female-dominated literary genre of *tanci*, how does *Zaisheng yuan* utilize not only its designated reader community but also the confined writing form to represent women and the idea of femininity? Moreover, considering the well-acknowledged break in narrative tone after volume 17, what does the change of authorship from Chen Duansheng to Liang Desheng tell us about representing the female body and sensorial experience? By asking these questions, this paper joins the conversation of gender studies with respect to this literary work and invites input from sensory studies to the issues of gender in early modern China.

FEELING THE LOTUS VERSUS HEARING THE BOOTS

Feet are frequently mentioned in *Zaisheng yuan* when characters are introduced or their movements described, which demonstrates narrative investment in the physical body and how such details bring the characters into focus. In this regard, *Zaisheng yuan* treats different genders equally and pays attention to both female and male feet, particularly in terms of their respective footwear—*lian* 蓮 (lotus shoes) or *xue* 靴 (boots). While talking about feet, in most cases in premodern China, we are actually focusing on their attire, the shoes. Dorothy Ko has already pointed out the significance of Chinese attire in expressing “civility, culture, and humanity,”²³ which coupled with the concept of body without a clear boundary yields the idea of the female body, and especially footbinding, as “part of female attire” and “a sign of civility and cultural advancement.”²⁴ When discussing the story of the famous cross-dressed Hua Mulan, Joseph Allen also points out an interesting differentiation between sartorial and somatic representations, as the earlier records of Mulan's change of gender mainly concentrate on her clothing and hair, while in early modern times the representations “begin to move away from the sartorial towards a more corporeal story”²⁵ with clear gendered gestures and bodily depictions. *Zaisheng yuan* as a work written in the high Qing period lies on the border of a transition from more sartorial to more somatic ways of expression, with the

²³ Ko, “The Body as Attire,” p. 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁵ Allen, “Dressing and Undressing,” p. 353.

character's feet in the majority of cases covered in shoes. Interestingly, the fact that feet are often hidden under shoes gives *Zaisheng yuan* a two-sided sensory effect: on the one hand, it treats male and female feet with their shoes as actual objects that can and should be observed by and induce sensory response from outsiders; on the other hand, it sometimes also takes the naming of the shoes, especially female shoes, as a reference to the body part, the foot, which not only is able to sense the outside world but also reveals the inner world of the characters. For now, I will illustrate how *Zaisheng yuan* presents the stereotypical images of female and male feet in its own ways. Later in this paper, I will emphasize how *Zaisheng yuan* also takes a detour from these conventions of simplifying and objectifying the female body and makes it truly shine as a body that moves, feels, and struggles with conflicting social roles and female identities.

One of the distinctive features of Chinese narrative fiction is its intense interest in material details and elaborate descriptions of characters' clothing, makeup, hair-styles, and so on, so that "the audience could thus visualize the character by concrete, bodily signs, not as mere abstractions."²⁶ *Tanci* fiction, including *Zaisheng yuan*, is no exception. In *Zaisheng yuan*, shoes often appear in disyllabic set phrases: female feet become *jinlian* 金蓮 (gold lotuses) or *honglian* 紅蓮 (red lotuses), delicately embroidered tiny shoes; unbound male feet are represented by the phrases *chaoxue* 朝靴 (court boots), *zhengxue* 征靴 (combat boots), or *wuxue* 烏靴 (black boots), alluding to male-dominated activities in officialdom or on the battlefield. Corresponding to the dress code in the late imperial period, in the story feet or shoes are never plain and neutral, but always are imbued with gendered implications and stereotypical sentiments. Because of the special rhythm of *tanci* with its prevalence of seven-character lines, there are also two kinds of variation used when describing female feet, namely "*xiao jinlian*" 小金蓮 (little golden lotus) as in the sentence "there are probably a pair of little golden lotuses" 多應是對小金蓮 (p. 921),²⁷ and "*jinlian jiao/zu*" 金蓮腳/足 (golden lotus-like feet) as in "stamp lightly her golden lotus-like feet" 輕輕一踩金蓮足 (p. 42). In special cases, these two variants might even combine, as in the lines, "This one, striding along with tiny golden lotus-like feet. That one, turning around her slender willow branch-like waist" 這一個，放開小小金蓮腳。那一個，調轉纖纖楊柳腰 (p. 528). These combinations only appear in the case of female feet, which, on the one hand, strengthen the memorability of the words by attaching a specific feature (to be little) or reiterating the signified body part (the feet),²⁸ while, on the other hand, reinforcing the decorative nature of female feet. Especially in the case of "*xiaoxiao jinlian jiao*" 小小金蓮腳

²⁶ Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, p. 201.

²⁷ All quotations of *Zaisheng yuan* cited in the main text are from the 1982 edition edited and collated by Liu Chongyi. The translations are by me unless otherwise noted. There are a few exceptions when I have modified existing translations done by Li Guo, for which I provide detailed citations.

²⁸ Albert Lord proposes the significance of using "formular," defined by Milman Parry as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" when composing songs in the oral tradition. See Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, chapter 3 ("The Formular"), p. 30. Walter Ong also suggests that in oral tradition, certain nouns always accompany certain adjectives to make formulated sets of phrases for the sake of easier memorization: "Oral folk prefer, especially in formal discourse, not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess; not the oak, but the sturdy oak." See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 38.

(tiny little golden-lotus-like feet), we observe a pair of highly decorated female feet that undergo layer upon layer of embellishment. Because all these expressions appear at the end of the seven-character line, it is reasonable to assume that they are there to fulfill the rhythm. The language use and the associated way of thinking in the format of *tanci* fiction definitely play a part in establishing and reinforcing the stereotypical image of female feet being tiny, delicate, and precious.

Using *jinlian* to describe female feet was already commonly seen in previous literary works, such as the fifteenth-century *shuochang cihua* 說唱詞話 (chantefables), which are written in a similar format with rhythmic language meant for reciting and were enjoyed by an urban readership, male and female alike, but were usually authored by men.²⁹ As Judith Butler argues, “the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time”;³⁰ thus the countless repetitions of the phrase *jinlian* could also be influenced by and help to construct the social imagination of gender. Concerning the readers’ and audience’s response to these chantefables, Dorothy Ko argues that “having enjoyed enough chantefables, the audience learned to interpret the cultural codes in life by the same rules.”³¹ The same can be said of *Zaisheng yuan* as a work of *tanci* fiction, but its female authorship and targeted female readership bring more complexity to questions of female sensations, especially when paralleled with the description of male feet or boots. The repeated term *jinlian* operates as more than a simple signifier and sets off a whole chain of lively experiences and ways of thinking.

In *Zaisheng yuan*, female steps are described as light and soft. Their movement becomes *kuan* 款 (together with the compounds *mankuan* 慢款 and *kuandong* 款動, which both mean moving slowly), which portrays a slow, elegant, graceful walk, as in “gently and slowly she moves her little golden lotuses” 輕輕款動小金蓮 (p. 92). In another case when the character Huangfu Zhanghua was in her coronation ceremony, the text goes “her gold lotuses softly stepped on the red carpet; jade seal held up high while raising up her emerald sleeves” 金蓮軟踏在紅氈, 玉印高擎翠袖抬 (p. 415). In this couplet, *ruanta* 軟踏 (step softly) is apparently in parallel with *gaoqing* 高擎 (hold up high), which is a commonly seen formative feature of *tanci* language. Nonetheless, in this case, instead of attributing softness to the red carpet (as in “*ruan hongzhan*” 軟紅氈 [soft red carpet]), the author chooses to use *ruan* 軟 to modify the action of the step (*ruanta* 軟踏). In comparison, a similar sentence describing female walking in another *tanci* fiction, *Bishenghua* 筆生花 (Blossoms from the brush), reads “the fragrant soil was soft to hold steady her gold lotuses; the white wall lightly supported her pointed finger tips” 香泥軟襯金蓮穩, 粉壁輕扶玉筍尖,³² clearly assigning the feature of softness solely to the ground the feet step on. Thus emphasized, softness in *Zaisheng yuan* is used to describe all three things in contact: the shoes, the feet, and the carpet. Attention is drawn to the sensory response of the female character, as she is the one feeling the softness of the carpet using her soft feet/shoes. In so doing, this brief description offers a glimpse of the character’s sensorial experience as a marker of her subjectivity, while at the same time underscoring her highly feminine presence in that moment of imperial grandeur.

²⁹ For more discussion on fifteenth-century chantefables, please see Idema, *Judge Bao and the Rule of Law*, and McLaren, *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables*.

³⁰ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” p. 520.

³¹ Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters*, p. 202.

³² Qiu Xinru, *Bishenghua*, p. 854.

Furthermore, the contrast between the sensory words soft and hard also appears elsewhere in the texts as gender-specific descriptions of mental states. When Meng Lijun/Li Mingtang teases Su Yingxue/Liang Suhua, her best friend and fake wife, she remarks that acting soft (*yiruan xinci* 意軟心慈 [weak willed and kindhearted], p. 726) would hinder her ability to suppress Huangfu in court and result in her having to reveal her female identity and end up as Huangfu's wife; when other people accuse Meng of cruelty in concealing her true identity to her husband and mother, they describe her as hard-hearted (*mao ruan xin pian ying* 貌軟心偏硬 [gentle in appearance but with a calloused heart], p. 960). Therefore, the qualities of soft and hard describe not only sensory experience but also the characters' affect, and accordingly the stable and conventional gender attributions of soft and hard become destabilized by the protagonist's embodiment of both gender's attributes.

In contrast, descriptions of male boots offer additional insight into the author's play with gender stereotypes. Male boots are typically portrayed as solid and well structured, as they are often associated with theatrical performance techniques, particularly movements such as *dun* 頓 or *die* 跌 (stamp), which directly convey a manly affect. For example, "once [Huangfu Shaohua] stamped his boots, his power and energy emerged" 一跌雙靴壯氣生 (p. 428); while for Meng Lijun's male alter ego, "his court boots stepped onto the ground and made the golden bricks ring; his great aspiration skyrocketed as high as the Jade Palace" 朝靴踏地金砖响, 壮志冲天玉殿高 (p. 278). As shown here, walking in male boots always announces itself both in literal sounds and in metaphorical signification. Other examples include:

With a cough and the court boots sounding; Prime Minister Li stepped out.
一聲咳嗽朝靴响, 步出尚书廊大人. (p. 371)

The sound of boots echoed in the throne room; all the talented people walked inside.
金鑾殿上響靴聲, 一眾英才向內行. (p. 384)

As soon as the boots sounded on the stairs; the command had already entered the curtain carried by the wind.
靴聲踏地初臨砌, 囑韻飄風已入簾. (p. 700)

In each case, the sound of footsteps arrives before the characters do and echoes loudly, announcing important plot points and dramatizing the episodes in question. We can also find this stereotypical way of connecting a loud sound with male feet and manly movements in other fiction such as the martial arts novel *San xia wu yi* 三俠五義 (The three heroes and five gallants). Despite occupying a female body and a pair of tiny feet, when called up by Judge Bao, the Shanxi merchant Qu Shen "took big strides into the hall" 大叉步兒走上堂來 and then plumps down with a loud and comical sound "GUDONG" 咕咚, which reveals his inner male identity.³³ In *Zaisheng yuan*, however, the absence of specific onomatopoeic words, and the mentioning of sound and hearing instead in the seven-character line, means that

³³ Shi Yukun, *San xia wu yi*, pp. 153, 158. Paize Keulemans also discusses cross-talking and cross-dressing as performative acts that destabilize and reaffirm different identities in *San xia wu yi*. See *Sound Rising from the Paper*, pp. 196–97.

the sound made by male boots is not a “slapstick”³⁴ moment, but one that seamlessly transforms the cross-dressed Meng Lijun into the official Li Mingtang endowed with a decent male look.

The contrast between “lotus” and “boot” reaches its extreme in chapter (*hui* 回) 73, written by Liang Desheng. When the heroine Meng Lijun finally changes back to female dress, “she took off the black boots with white soles, revealing two red lotuses that seemed to float in the wind” 粉底烏靴齊脫下, 露出了, 紅蓮兩朵似風飄 (p. 1030). Taking off male boots and revealing her female slippers, her true identity, is not an uncommon trope in stories of female cross-dressing. Yet the depiction here of female feet as petals floating in the wind pushes the limits of the corporeal by portraying a part of the body as so fragile that it is on the verge of being ephemeral and almost immaterial. The visualization of the process of peeling off the hard protective layer of the boots to expose a gentle soft core, accompanied by the strong color contrast of white, black, and red, intensifies the ultra-vulnerability of the female body and, by implication, female identity.³⁵

The parallel associations of female/lotus/touch and male/boot/sound exhibit patterned ways of thinking about gender norms. In his discussion of *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the red chamber), Ling Hon Lam mentions the distinction between reading a drama script silently and watching a drama performance with the whole family, with the former being a private experience conducive to constructing one’s interiority whereas the latter is a form of participation in community.³⁶ This argument inspires us to consider sound and listening as an extrovert community activity. The sound of the boots in *Zaisheng yuan* serves as a prominent staging device that helps establish and construct spaces of officialdom and the court, which, in turn, emphasizes the public and collective nature of male bodies and actions. In contrast, because the haptic feeling of lightness and softness associated with female feet is implicit and a projection of the female character’s self-experience, this mode of narrative expression generates a sense of privacy and intimacy that female readers can more readily access. By linking gendered experiences to different senses, namely the haptic versus the auditory, *Zaisheng yuan* delivers a structure of gender differentiation designated as inside versus outside, private versus public, and implicit versus explicit. In other words, frequent contrast with extrovert male feet/boots highlights the introvert attribute of female feet/lotus shoes.

Yet questions remain as to why the author writes so sensually about female feet. Are Chen and Liang simply following the convention of generating a fetishized gaze upon the bound foot? Or, are there other possible interpretations in the context of female authorship, protagonist, and readership? In the following sections, I will call

³⁴ Keulemans, *Sound Rising from the Paper*, p. 197.

³⁵ Interestingly, the same description appears again in *Bishenghua*. When Jiang Junbi 姜峻璧 is trying to show Chunniang 純娘 her female identity, the sentence goes: “Taking off numerous layers of white silk bindings, it turned out to show two petals of golden lotuses floating in the wind” 扯去白綾無數道, 方露出, 金蓮兩瓣可風飄 (p. 628). Considering that *Bishenghua* is written after *Zaisheng yuan* with an intention to correct its standard of morality, it is possible that this image of fragile female feet is so well rooted in the *tanci* lexicon that it wins favor with another female author.

³⁶ Lam, “The Matriarch’s Private Ear,” pp. 376–98.

attention to two types of exposure of the female foot to examine *Zaisheng yuan's* treatment of gender taboo, female agency, and women's struggle under the male gaze.

REVEALING FEET AND HER SUBJECTIVITY

Considering the petal-like fragility of female feet as described in the examples above, it is surprising that there are several instances in the text where female characters voluntarily expose their feet—either in the form of the tiny red shoes that are hidden inside the cross-dressed male boots, or as bare feet without erotic connotations. I argue that rather than being fetishized objects of a male gaze, female characters in these cases are showcasing their agency and ensuring their female identification by actively revealing their bound feet.³⁷

In chapter 9, in order to persuade Huangfu Zhanghua and her mother to let down their guard, Wei Yong'e 衛勇娥, the cross-dressed leader of the bandits, decides to take off her own boots to reveal her tiny red lotuses:

Her slender jade-white hands held up her feet; under the candlelight her black boots were taken off. Only after who knows how many layers of white silk were removed, were the feet with red shoes finally revealed. The embroidered shoes were still there, as small as three *cun*; the two petals of red lotus trod on the Xiao and Xiang Rivers.³⁸ Now the lady and the young lady believed her; truly, they were filled with mixed feelings of grief and joy. Yin Liangzhen [Zhanghua's mother] held [Wei Yong'e's] jade-like hands; in tears, they went back together to sit on the ivory bench.

玉手纖纖舉起足，烏靴脫下映燈光。白綾扯去知多少，方露紅鞋腳一雙。繡履猶存三寸小，紅蓮兩瓣踏瀟湘。夫人小姐心方信，實在是，悲喜交加意更忙。尹氏良貞攜玉手，淚盈盈，回身同坐象牙床。(p. 108)

This scene of revelation is highly staged, not only taking place under candlelight but also enhanced by a slew of starkly contrasting colors such as the black boots, the white silk, and the red embroidered shoes. All of these contribute to a stimulating visual experience and a deliberate display of feminine beauty.

³⁷ Anne Cheng's discussion on Josephine Baker shows a similar example in modern times. In both cases the power relationship between the observer and the observed is much more dynamic than in a static hierarchy, leading to a situation in which "reification and recognition fuse" and "conditions of subjecthood and objecthood merge." See Cheng, *Second Skin*, p. 15. This inspires us to rethink the meaning of surface, in *Zaisheng yuan's* case the layering of male shoe over female shoe, as more than just a cover.

³⁸ The Xiao 瀟 and Xiang 湘 are two famous rivers in the south of today's Hunan Province, which have rich literary connotations concerning the two mythical empresses E'huang 娥皇 and Nüying 女英 and their tragic love stories. Early records can be found in *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (Classic of mountains and seas), Qu Yuan's 屈原 (343 BC–278 BC) *Jiuge* 九歌 (Nine songs), and Zhang Hua's 張華 (232–300) *Bowuzhi* 博物志 (Records of diverse matters). Besides the concern with rhyme, here the text mentions the Xiao and Xiang to enhance the femininity of the whole foot-unbinding situation and Wei Yong'e as a cross-dressed woman.

The emphasis on the length of the white silk and the size of the feet again accentuates Wei's elite family background and upbringing, which abruptly removes her from the role of menacing bandit and places her in the same social class as Huangfu Zhanghua, both being daughters of gentry families. What is worth noting is that in this scene, Wei's extraordinarily calm, even confident, manner when exposing her feet is possible only because she faces two women. They know well what the white cloth represents: once the functional tools used to create the tiny feet, the long and layered material is now also part of the disguise that helps hide Wei's true gender by enlarging her feet. The word *youcun* 猶存 (still there) conveys almost a sense of pride as the suspense of unwinding the lengthy fabric symbolizes the determination and dedication behind preserving those tiny feet, and by the same token, her female identity. Once Wei's gentry woman identity is confirmed by the sight of her tiny shoes, Lady Yin and Huangfu Zhanghua's previous misunderstanding is resolved: they had thought Wei Yong'e was a male bandit who kidnapped and intended to dishonor them. Once they reach a female consensus around footbinding, Lady Yin immediately moves to be physically closer to Wei by holding her hands and sitting together in a gesture indicative of forming an alliance, which can be seen as continuing the shared haptic experience of footbinding that started from their childhood.

Wei Yong'e's choice perfectly demonstrates how important her bound feet, as well as the delicate shoes, are for a gentry woman. The way she chooses to wear them—to wear *honglian* (red lotus) inside of *wuxue* (black boots)—makes a statement: male attire (both physical and mental) only serves to cover up and protect—but not replace—the soft and gentle female part inside. The red lotus is what she can never leave behind physically nor give up mentally—indeed, it remains a critical expression of her identity. Wei Yong'e's example follows an archetypal trajectory in the long literary history of cross-dressing female characters—it is her choice to dress as a man, to keep the red lotuses hidden inside boots, to show her secret to female companions, and, in later chapters, to return to her life as a woman and have a good marriage. This common trajectory of female cross-dressing can be seen in many other stories, such as Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) “Yan shi” 顏氏 (Lady Yan) from *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異 (Strange tales from a Chinese studio), where the female protagonist Lady Yan cross-dresses as a man to take the examinations and assume official positions instead of her husband, and later exposes her female identity to her sister-in-law by taking off her shoes. Regarding this transformation, Judith Zeitlin argues that it is “seemingly effortless and instantaneous,” because “altering one's sexual identity becomes as simple as changing one's hat and clothes.”³⁹ It is worth noting that in Pu's writing, the boots “were full of withered cotton fiber” 則敗絮滿焉,⁴⁰ which is very different from the depiction of Wei's aesthetically pleasing bindings and red shoes. This indicates the female author Chen Duansheng's intention—exemplified by *Zaisheng yuan*'s language and aesthetic style—of beautifying female characters from head to toe, literally. I will come back to this point in later sections on Meng Lijun's feet.

³⁹ Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, p. 120.

⁴⁰ Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, p. 1505.

After holding hands with Lady Yin, Wei Yong'e also receives an even more passionate response from Huangfu Zhanghua:

She [Huangfu Zhanghua] held the light with her jade-like hand and lowered her head to look; she exclaimed, "How lovely these pointed phoenix shoes are!" Her slender finger held on to the sleeves of [Wei Yong'e's] robe; wiping away tears and sighing, she began to tell her story in detail.

玉手執燈低首看，贊一聲，尖尖鳳履可人腸。春纖扯住宮袍袖，揮淚長籲道細詳。(p. 108)

Seeing, or to be specific, carefully observing and appreciating Wei's shapely bound feet, Huangfu Zhanghua is now emotionally connected with Wei and bursts into tears to begin confessing her own story. While Wei's previous oral explanation could not dispel Lady Yin and Huangfu Zhanghua's doubts but only triggers more questions, the act of exposing her body to reveal their shared female identity is seemingly more powerful and redemptive than anything Wei could have verbally communicated and has the power to induce mental attachments. Considering the fact that the intended audience for *Zaisheng yuan* and *tanci* was gendered female, the potential for objectifying the feet as a spectacle instead dissolves into mutual understanding, empathy, and female bonding, as Huangfu Zhanghua is deeply moved by Wei's well-preserved feet even in the face of unimaginable adversity.

When Huangfu Zhanghua praises Wei Yong'e's tiny feet with the exclamation "keren chang" 可人腸 (How lovely!), which evokes a visceral endearing that connects to one's innards (similar to the expression *xingan baobei* 心肝寶貝 [literally, treasures like heart and liver]), she actually shares similar vocabulary with the conventional male fetish regarding female bound feet. However, it is what follows that transcends this discourse: instead of aiming for bodily intimacy and sexual pleasure, Zhanghua's subsequent action is to resort to language and communication—intellectual activity—to tell her own story. She expects sympathy from Yong'e, and thus the owner of the bound feet is treated not as an object but as an equal. So Zhanghua's admiration of Wei's tiny feet triggers mutual understanding, even trust, between the two women. In a similar scene, when Su Yingxue/Liang Suhua pretends to marry Meng Lijun/Li Mingtang and goes to see "his" family, two ladies from the Kang 康 family⁴¹ also pay special attention to her tiny feet: "The phoenix shoes slightly appeared from under the dress; this was a pair of extremely pointed golden lotuses that people adore so much" 鳳履裙邊微微露，這一對，尖殺金蓮愛殺人 (p. 274). Seeing her feet, the Kang family ladies accept Liang into the family. Here, a pair of well-shaped tiny feet, the pointed golden lotuses, conveys a wealth of information to be decoded by other women, allowing them to communicate their backgrounds and personal histories of pain, as well as evaluating one's prospects of marriage and suitability for family life.

Zaisheng yuan also contains a scene in which a female character exposes her bare feet. In chapter 47, Liu Yanyu 劉燕玉, the half-sister of Liu Kuibi and concubine to

⁴¹ After leaving home cross-dressed as Li Mingtang, Meng is adopted by Master Kang and becomes a member of the Kang family.

Huangfu Shaohua, learns that her husband has received news of his principal wife Meng Lijun and begins to worry about falling into disfavor:

Sitting back on the bed, [Liu Yanyu] took off her dress and changed into sleeping shoes. Her bare feet slowly crossed over her knees, her fragrant arched feet half-covered in shoes bumping into each other. Face depressed, mind infatuated, she was guessing all the possibilities again and again to herself.

回身坐在牙床上，解卻湘裙換睡鞋。素足橫擔先款款，香勾半著又挨挨。容慘淡，意癡呆，暗自疑來暗自猜。(p. 660)

It is highly unusual that in a piece of nonerotic fiction the reader encounters descriptions of bare feet that have been bound, because most of the time, such sights are extremely taboo and only accessible to a woman's husband. To have the character Liu Yanyu show her bare feet, on the one hand, is in accord with her unorthodox social and familial status (born of a concubine and claiming to be the wife candidate of Huangfu Shaohua without parental approval), while, on the other hand, it indicates her lack of Shaohua's attention and affection, as the feet are not adorned with embellishment to attract men. Furthermore, the scene of a woman baring her feet in the boudoir as depicted here is less scandalous because *Zaisheng yuan* presumes a predominantly female readership. The character Liu Yanyu demonstrates vividly how a woman feels about her body/feet and the space where her body exists: on the one hand, despite being troubled emotionally, she is physically relaxed and comfortable in the space she owns; on the other hand, the elegantly curved feet move about so naturally here that the female character does not even pay attention to them but focuses on her entangled thoughts instead. This representation of a female body in solitary retreat delicately depicts the female daily experience and a private space that is totally safe and self-indulgent.

A subsequent scene written by Liang Desheng, however, presents an entirely opposite set of circumstances. In chapter 76, when Huangfu Shaohua, having become husband to Meng Lijun, Su Yingxue, and Liu Yanyu, approaches a sleeping Su and tries to lay down beside her, he startles her into action:

Looking at her, her hair bun was loose and the hairpin almost falling out; her makeup had faded overnight. Putting on her clothes, sitting at the edge of the bed, she was furtively hiding and binding her gold lotuses. Her curved shoes were only three *cun* long, fully embroidered with the pattern of sweet osmanthus; a delicate pearl decorated the red tip.

只見他，雲鬢蓬鬆釵欲墜，隔宵脂粉退容顏。穿衣服，坐床沿，藏藏躲躲纏金蓮。三寸弓桂花滿繡，珍珠一粒滴紅尖。(p. 1084)

While this scene also describes a woman in a state of (un)dress in her room, the reader's position has totally changed to take on the point of view of the male character gazing upon the woman. The observation of disheveled hair and faded makeup

implies a level of allure to the male gaze. Furthermore, the female character's action of "furtively hiding and binding her gold lotuses" contrasts sharply with Liu Yanyu's demeanor in the previous example. Indeed, the action itself is caused by the unexpected presence of the male figure in the solitary confines of the boudoir. In contrast to the scene of Liu Yanyu's bare feet written by Chen Duansheng, the introduction of male voyeurism into the same private female space by Liang Desheng separates the sequel chapters from the original work—the comfortable, maybe even bold, construction of female empathy and companionship is now replaced by the clichés of the talent–beauty love story. Or, if we take the phrase at the start of this paragraph “*zhi jian ta*” 只見他 (look at her), a commonly seen expression in *tanci* works that marks the beginning of a description of a character's appearance, as not only referring to the male protagonist Shaohua in the narrative but also calling upon any implicit subject to observe the improperly dressed female protagonist, it is even clearer that Liang does not have in mind a closed and intimate female community.

Zaisheng yuan also sets up narrative opportunities for the protagonist Meng Lijun to expose her bound feet in the form of her self-portrait. In chapter 10, after planning to run away from home dressed like a man to avoid marrying Liu Kuibi, Meng Lijun decides to paint a self-portrait to leave with her parents at home. The visual details of this portrait are as follows:

Dark cloud-like hair rolled up in a fine coil; a golden phoenix-shaped hairpin parted the black hair at one side of her forehead. Face fresh as a lotus flower bathed in jade-like dew droplets; eyebrows two willow leaves carrying spring mist. Adorned with plum flower petals, her brows were all the more lovely; rarely did words depart from her cherry-like mouth. Almond-shaped eyes gazed attentively and reflected the limpid light of autumn waters; snowy complexion was nicely set off with crimson blushes. Bright pink skirts hid her gentle footsteps; a dark cape hugged her pale blue shirt. Emerald sleeves softly covered her jade-like fingers; the silky skirt swayed slightly to reveal her golden lotuses. Her elegant manner outshone many; she was truly incomparable among those of her generation.⁴²

烏雲寶髻一層盤，金鳳斜挑翠鬢邊。面映芙蓉含玉露，眉分柳葉帶春煙。梅妝粉額添姣豔，櫻顆珠唇未語言。鳳眼微疑秋水動，雪腮輕抹嫩紅鮮。水紅裙子凌波步，皂色雲肩月白衫。翠袖輕垂籠玉筍，湘裙半舞見金蓮。飄然出世神仙態，絕代無雙獨佔先。(p. 135)

Judith Zeitlin argues that it was very common for a women's self-portrait to be a generic beautiful woman painting, because a woman will always choose to paint an ideal image of herself that complies with the beauty standard in literary tropes.⁴³ Meng Lijun's self-portrait is not far removed from this practice. Also, the words cited above are very similar to the ones describing alluring female demons playing football in *Journey to the West*, which read:

⁴² Modified from Li Guo's translation. See Guo, *Women's Tanci Fiction*, p. 40.

⁴³ Zeitlin, "The Life and Death of the Image," p. 237.

Faces are dotted with sweat just like flowers bathed in dew droplets;
 Moth-like eyebrows speckled with dirt are just like willow leaves carrying
 spring mist.
 Emerald sleeves hanging low cover their jade-like fingers;
 Silky skirts dragged aslant reveal their golden lotuses.

汗沾粉面花含露，塵染蛾眉柳帶煙。
 翠袖低垂籠玉筍，緗裙斜拽露金蓮。⁴⁴

Similarly, we can also find the combination of *jinlian*, *xiangqun* 湘裙 (silk skirt), *yusun* 玉筍 (jade-like finger), and *cuixiu* 翠袖 (emerald sleeves) in *Water Margin*, as sentences like “narrow golden lotuses, slightly revealed under the silky skirt show infinite emotion; slender jade-like fingers, half covered by the emerald sleeves evoke endless desire” 金蓮窄窄，湘裙微露不勝情；玉筍纖纖，翠袖半籠無限意⁴⁵ are used to describe the male protagonist Song Jiang’s 宋江 concubine Yan Poxi 閻婆惜. Note that both of these male-authored novels use such language to describe the appearance of femme fatale characters, while the female author Chen Duansheng in *Zaisheng yuan* adopts it to depict the positive female protagonist Meng Lijun’s portrait. This fact, on the one hand, proves that she can borrow from a limited corpus to write the narrative work, while, on the other hand, it also implies the potential of reversing the power relationship by having the words not vocalized by an outsider (possibly a male narrator) about women but instead used to describe a woman looking at her painted self-portrait. Especially the incorporation of her tiny feet, the golden lotuses, into the self-portrait complicates our reading of the text. To understand this choice, we will need to view this description of Meng’s self-portrait in light of two traditions: the beautiful woman painting (*meiren tu* 美人圖 or *shinü hua* 仕女畫) tradition in art history and the female self-portrait tradition in literature, especially in fictional works.

To directly paint a woman’s feet, either in shoes or bare, is not a common practice for the beautiful woman painting in early modern China, since such paintings are considered “strongly sexual symbols in a Chinese setting.”⁴⁶ Especially in depictions of gentry women, the feet are often covered by a long, floor-length dress. One common type of portraiture where women’s bound feet are freely depicted is the erotic painting, together with translucent robes or seductive gestures. Occasionally, there are paintings where the feet are seen, interestingly all with red shoes that correspond to the term *honglian* (red lotus). While the bound feet may carry “amorous and sexual connotations,” together with the refined setting of a study room, they indicate the characters’ “privileged upbringing.”⁴⁷ Another instance in which bare female feet can be seen is the bodhisattva (or Guanyin 觀音) painting, where the revelation of bare feet showcases her divine power.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Wu Cheng’en, *Xiyou ji*, p. 835.

⁴⁵ Shi Nai’an, *Shuihu zhuan*, p. 241.

⁴⁶ Cahill et al., *Beauty Revealed*, p. 102.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 86–87. For more discussions on beautiful women paintings, see Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, pp. 149–97.

The literary lineage of women making self-portraits can be traced back to medieval times,⁴⁹ while the most famous example is Tang Xianzu's 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) *Mudan ting*, where the female character Du Liniang draws her self-portrait before dying from lovesickness. Meng Lijun's painting process largely follows Du Liniang's model in that she first complains about being beautiful but ill-fated when drawing herself, then with sorrow and tears cannot finish the portrait until the third attempt. Although the immediate purposes for the self-portraits differ—Du Liniang wishes to preserve her beauty in the human world before she dies, while Meng Lijun reproduces her own image to keep her parents company during her long, potentially permanent, absence—both characters share the desire to observe, appreciate, and reconstruct themselves. Moreover, both instances hinge on a metaphorical splitting of the women's identity: for Du Liniang, the painting represents a physical demarcation of life and death, a means by which part of her can live on;⁵⁰ in Meng Lijun's case, the portrait functions as material evidence of her female identity, which must be abandoned at home in order for her to escape from her assigned gender obligations.

In this light, Meng's decision to incorporate her feet in the self-portrait appears even more meaningful. With her parents being the intended viewers, the self-portrait is not only an object of filial piety but also proof of her female identity, for which no details can be spared. Her feet are part and parcel of her femininity, much like her other features including black hair, almond-shaped eyes, and snowy complexion. By leaving this image in her parent's house, Meng successfully cuts ties with everything this household has given her before being “reborn” as the male character Li Mingtang. Painting this self-portrait with tiny feet as a sign of her female identity demonstrates Meng's idea of womanhood and female agency.⁵¹ The existence of the tiny feet is critical to her understanding of female identity. She needs to paint them together with her other features to complete this ideal image of a beautiful woman and to claim it to be hers. Furthermore, incorporating these details in the description of the painting demonstrates Meng Lijun's self-awareness and the author's idea of female agency. Whereas in *Mudan ting* feet are not mentioned as Du Liniang paints herself but only noticed by the male protagonist Liu Mengmei, *Zaisheng yuan* narrates a scene in which only women are present—Meng Lijun the painter, Ronglan the maid, Chen Duansheng the author, and even the readers who are ideally limited to women. That is to say, here the tiny feet are not exposed to erotic voyeurism by men, but actively, or naturally, revealed by a woman who considers and expresses it as an essential part of a complete beautiful woman image to an audience of the same gender. From this perspective, Meng takes back control of her own body from the male gaze to represent it in the way she chooses. Moreover, through depicting Meng Lijun drawing a self-portrait like this, the female author Chen Duansheng also takes possession of the language that she borrows from literary tropes and reverses the power dynamic.

⁴⁹ For examples, see Hu Yiwen, “Ta de ‘mianrong’,” pp. 77–82.

⁵⁰ Concerning the issue of multiple identities of Du Liniang, see Lu, *Persons, Roles, and Minds*.

⁵¹ The tiny feet on Meng's self-portrait also ironically foreshadow the potential of refeminization as pursued by both Huangfu Shaohua and the emperor later in the text, which brings Meng Lijun tremendous trouble. In this sense, the bound feet on her portrait indicate her lingering connection with her female identity and are an inauspicious sign of future suffering.

Moreover, both descriptions of Meng's *lingbo bu* 凌波步 (gentle footsteps) and *piaoran* 飄然 (floating) appearance bring an extra lightness to the female figure, which is echoed later in the same chapter when Meng cross-dresses as a man and leaves home. After putting on several layers of white silk binding cloth and a pair of men's boots brought by her maid, Meng "quietly and slowly walk[s] away from her house" 輕輕款步離房戶 (p. 142) because she is "afraid the loud noise of the boots will wake everyone up" 猶恐靴聲驚眾人 (p. 143). Symbolically and literally, she abandons her light, deity-like appearance and fits herself into the heavy boots to face future hardship. Her acute sensitivity to lightness and heaviness becomes more powerful in contrast to the following couplet describing Meng's maid Ronglan, who also cross-dresses as a male servant and remains in Meng's company: "Dragging the luggage with her hands, [Ronglan] did not feel heavy; Carrying the bookcase on her back she still felt light" 手拖行李全非重; 背負書箱尚覺輕 (p. 143). Meng's burden derives from her social status—it is because of her identity as a gentry woman that she is capable of being sensitive about the relative weight of her feet, which deepens her anxieties but also gains her the willpower to actively embrace change—and all these distinctive recognitions of the identity of a gentry woman start from deliberately drawing a pair of lotus feet in her self-portrait.

REVEALED FEET AND DRAMATIC RESPONSE

Zaisheng yuan also depicts moments when a woman's bound feet are exposed against her will. Besides describing the fetishistic gaze upon the objectified female body by both genders, the text represents female characters' intense responses to these gazes. Extreme bodily reactions like spitting blood indicate an intractable mental conflict, providing readers with a visceral sense of a real, pain-stricken female body.

The first of these occasions takes place when Meng Lijun's self-portrait is scrutinized, not by the intended audience (her parents) but by two men, Huangfu Shaohua and the emperor, both suitors of Meng Lijun who end up desiring her bound feet. To them, the painted image of Meng, like the person herself, is no more than something to behold, possess, or exchange.

Huangfu Shaohua's observation of Meng Lijun's portrait goes through four stages: (1) Seeing the portrait Meng's parents gave him and being surprised by her beauty and virtue; (2) Viewing the portrait with his own parents, surrounded by servants and maids, and admiring her beautiful appearance including her attire; (3) Hanging and worshiping the portrait in his study, precisely praising her facial appearance; and (4) After repeatedly gazing upon the portrait and composing a poem about it in the middle of the night, finally mentioning "Her phoenix embroidered shoes stand under the moon beyond the scented dust" 鳳鞋立月絕香塵 (p. 473). Through these four stages, Huangfu Shaohua's appreciation of the painting grows increasingly corporeal and intimate: from noting her virtue, to admiring her beautiful figure, her face, and finally her feet. The *fengxie* 鳳鞋 (phoenix embroidered shoes), in particular, constitute a very feminine image that is suggestive of both Meng's elite social standing and men's sexual desire for her.

The emperor's gaze on Meng's portrait also follows roughly progressive stages: "Two court maids said that they received the order; rolling out the painting revealed a woman in skirt and hairpins. When the painting was half unrolled

[by the court ladies], one could already see her peach-blossom-like face; when it was fully uncovered, one could see her phoenix-embroidered shoes” 彩女兩名稱領旨，新圖一扯現裙釵。半舒已露桃花面，全展方窺鳳口鞋 (p. 671). Along with the action of unrolling the portrait, the emperor’s gaze moves from her overall attire to her face, and finally to her elaborately embroidered shoes. The description “the emperor gazed and became deeply moved; he couldn’t help but feel his heart quiver” 君王看到情深處，不覺龍心搖兩搖 (p. 671) clearly illustrates an intensifying sensual response to Meng’s image. The most intriguing part is the moment when the emperor recognizes the female figure in the painting as his male Prime Minister Li Mingtang 酈明堂; he thinks, “I felt nothing before seeing the painting; but now I am completely enamored with her after seeing her true appearance” 未觀圖畫還猶可，好叫朕，看了真容著了迷 (p. 671). The concept of *zhenrong* 真容 (true appearance) has rich cultural connotations in both literary and religious history. In literature, a portrait or the related action of painting a portrait can be called *xiezhēn* 寫真 (literally, depicting the truth),⁵² just as in the title of the famous scene in *Mudan ting* where Du Liniang paints her self-portrait. As for religions, “*zhenrong* is often found in the Chinese Buddhist literature, referring to the essential and transcendental form of the Buddha that is invisible, and thus unrepresentable,”⁵³ and the same also goes with Daoist texts.⁵⁴ Thus, *zhenrong* in the context of *Zaisheng yuan* could have at least two layers of meanings: first, it emphasizes the visual representative nature of a person’s face, a portrait painting; second, it is supposed to capture at least both the figurative and spiritual truth of that person.⁵⁵ Notably, based on the emperor’s surprised reaction, we can tell that the *zhenrong* here does not have much to do with Meng Lijun as an actual person, who appears in front of the emperor every day in the court, but with the one she visually preserved in the painting. Besides the differences in the conventional gendered attire, one significant physical distinction here is her display of bound feet in the image, which appears in a climatic fashion when revealed (both in the painting and in the text) and no doubt serves as a defining feature of her female identity. This episode demonstrates the ways in which visual representation constructs and mediates a woman’s gender identity and beauty.⁵⁶ In other words, Meng Lijun only becomes visible, legible, and desirable to the men in *Zaisheng yuan* when she conforms to and is conditioned by representational conventions.

⁵² The basic meaning of *zhenrong* is true appearance. It can also refer to portrait paintings or figure statues. Early records of the word “*xiezhēn*” can be found in Yang Xianzhi’s 楊銜之 (fl. 386–535) “Luoyang qielan ji” 洛陽伽藍記 (Records of Buddhist temples in Luoyang), where it refers to the appearance of religious figures. See Luo Zhufeng et al., comps., *Hanyu da cidian*, p. 801.

⁵³ Choi, “*Zhenrong* to *Ruixiang*,” p. 365.

⁵⁴ See Raz, “‘True Forms’ and ‘True Faces’.” See also Choo and Ditter, “‘On Commemorative Inscription,’” p. 151.

⁵⁵ Loreta Poškaitė has mentioned that the idea of *zhen* 真 in the Chinese context cannot be equated with “realism” or “imitation of reality,” but “was associated with reservation of artistic expression (*hanxu*), the manifestation of vital energy (*qi*) and idea (*yi*) in landscape painting, originality and spontaneity of self-expression, original/pure nature and heart-mind, idealized or perfect image of the person, autographic.” See Poškaitė, “Authenticity/Genuineness/Truth (*Zhen* 真),” p. 153.

⁵⁶ The idea of confirming a woman’s beauty and falling in love with her via her self-portrait can be traced back to the famous Tang tale of Zhenzhen. See Zeitlin, “The Life and Death of the Image,” p. 235.

Although the male gaze seems to undermine Meng's agency in creating her self-portrait, *Zaisheng yuan* further complicates the gendered object–subject positions, depicting Meng Lijun's first reunion with her own portrait as a chance to expose the constructive nature of gendered viewing. While Meng's original plan for painting the portrait is to leave it to accompany her parents, she is caught off guard seeing the painting when she is invited to Huangfu Shaohua's study: "Staring at it, I know it is drawn by my own hand; I cannot help but be seized with pain in the heart" 凝眸一覽知親筆, 不覺心中暗痛酸 (p. 476). This psychological pain is caused by the unexpected reunion with the portrait and the old self that she has discarded, as well as by her great disappointment in its misappropriation. As if addressing a real person, she ponders: "I left you at home to accompany mother and father; how could you be given to Shaohua? Now I am reunited with my old thing left behind three years ago; how can I not feel sorrow and pain?" 留你於家伴父娘, 如何竟付少華郎? 三年舊物今重遇, 卻教我, 怎不悲來怎不傷 (p. 476). By describing her intense emotional pain, the text incorporates a female voice into the joined male viewing by Huangfu Shaohua and Li Mingtang, and even gives partial control back to the female protagonist as she holds the authority to assert the correct way to use and the correct place to put the painting. While the female Meng Lijun is in great pain, her male disguise as Li Mingtang appears in an extraordinarily calm and relaxed manner, as he claims to be unaware of the person in the painting and praises it: "Not only her beautiful gesture was extraordinary, but her bearing is so vivid as if she were alive. She has an appearance that can overthrow states and cities; truly she is a goddess descending from heaven" 不但丰姿迥出群, 更兼態度競如生. 這般傾國傾城貌, 竟是天姿下降神 (p. 476). Later, when Shaohua again presents his commitment to marry no one but Meng Lijun, she even jokes about playing the role of the matchmaker for him: "What if I keep an eye out for you, serve as your matchmaker? After three years you should take a wife; I advise you to marry again soon" 不如竟替你留心, 做個為媒作伐人? 過了三年該一娶, 勸君早早再連姻 (p. 479). As we readers, unlike Shaohua in the story, are told by the text that Meng Lijun is simply playing the role of a male minister and "intentionally raises her voice and pretends to praise [the painting]" 故意高聲假讚揚 (p. 476) to hide her true painful inner feelings, it is implied that the way to eroticize the painting like men do is not innate but can be fabricated—as long as one follows the convention and makes similar statements, one can pretend to possess the male gaze.

Only through female sensations, here the pain in the mind, can one capture the true meaning of this self-representation by a woman. In this sense, the text challenges the clichéd expression of the male gaze through the involvement of the female experience. The deceptive feature of Li Mingtang's voice exposes the fantasized nature of Huangfu Shaohua/the emperor's gaze and statements, while both responses call for an intervention of female agency. Note that there is no mention of the feet in Meng Lijun's fake praise of her own portrait; this could be due to the concise use of language in this particular scene, or the author Chen Duansheng's intention to maintain decency for her female protagonist (since female feet are erotic in a male conversation), or simply an oversight when Chen is fabricating the male voice. Nonetheless, regarding the act of pretending to speak from the perspective of another gender, Meng Lijun speaking in the voice of Li Mingtang parallels the author Chen Duansheng speaking in the voice of Huangfu Shaohua or the emperor. The danger of exposing the deceptive nature of the former is that it will reveal the imaginative

nature of the latter and eventually render all voices in the story as performative. In fact, writing in the literary genre of *tanci* fiction, which includes the author's real-life encounters at the beginning and end of each volume of the story, already grants Chen a constantly splitting identity and a relatively easy division and clear awareness of onstage and offstage. While all language and representations can be performative by nature, the sense of pain, felt by the female characters and written by the female author for her female readers, has to be pushed again and again to the foreground of the story, probably because of its ability to remain truthful and penetrate the narrative maze.

The revelation of Meng's bound feet reaches a narrative climax later in the story, when her real bound feet, not the painted ones, become exposed and lead to the final breakdown of her male disguise. In chapter 64, the revelation is staged as dramatically as possible: two excited palace maids twice attempt to undo the boots worn by a drunk and sleeping Meng Lijun. At first they only succeed in removing her male boots and discovering a pair of male socks inside, while the second attempt finally reveals countless layers of bindings, the red embroidered shoes, and yet another pair of smaller sleeping shoes, with a detailed account of their patterning and highly skilled fabrication:

They saw that the red embroidered shoes were extremely exquisite; they were no longer than two *cun* plus six *fen*. Quite pointy, very slender. The soft soles had the pattern of crushed cotton. On the vamps, flower-patterned five-colored wool threads were seamed; inside the shoes, there were square green silk wedges. So lovely, so adorable; the two lotus feet were exquisite beyond human imagining.

只見那，紅繡鞋兒分外精，無非二寸六分零。尖細細，瘦伶伶。軟底行成碎棉文。面上是，五色彩絨花鎖口。裡邊是，四方綠緞小提跟。真可愛，實堪欣，兩隻金蓮妙絕人。(p. 922)

The purpose of these elaborate descriptions is to emphasize the incredible tininess of Meng's feet at only "two *cun* plus six *fen* [about 3.67 inches]" 二寸零六分 (p. 922), which in the words of the two court maids is "so rare" 稀奇呀 (p. 922, repeated three times) and "truly unmatched in the whole world" 真真蓋世無 (p. 922). The unimaginable tininess of her feet, which compare favorably with those of Huangfu Zhanghua ("Surprisingly, they could be even a hair smaller compared with the empress's" 竟能比，中宮國母小分毫 [p. 922]), declares the fact that Meng is the best woman, just as Li Mingtang is the best man by achieving the title of *zhuangyuan* 狀元 (first place in the imperial examination).⁵⁷ Here, the author exhausts every compositional technique—plot twist, elaborate visual descriptions, and exaggerated dialogue—to render this moment the apex of the story and Meng's hidden feet the ultimate spectacle for readers to gaze upon. An abundance of contrasting colors and textures in this scene enhances its sensual quality—the

⁵⁷ When discussing *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅, Ding Naifei notices the competitive nature of male erotic views of women in which "bound feet—and the parts of the body they stand in for—are valued in comparison with other bound feet." In this sense, the paragraph quoted here could be said to follow the tradition of the male gaze. See Ding, *Obscene Things*, p. 174.

black shoes with white soles, the white socks and white bindings, a pair of red embroidered shoes with gold thread, another pair of red sleeping shoes with green inner heels, even the two maids described as wearing colorful garments and carrying blue handkerchiefs—and constitutes a cinematic full view. The slow progression from outside to inside also represents an attempt to invade and capture the actual body and the related senses. However, unlike the previously discussed episode of Wei Yong'e's voluntary revelation of her feet to two sympathetic female observers, this scene is entirely voyeuristic, and antithetical to the sense of female intimacy and connection asserted on earlier occasions.⁵⁸ With this portrayal of a wholly incapacitated Meng, the voyeuristic impulse and guilt-ridden pleasure of the spectacle extend from the two maids serving as diegetic observers to the extra-diegetic readers who share in the illicit discovery.⁵⁹

For the most part, this passage induces great sensual excitement; even the two maids are continually astonished by how small Meng's feet are and how beautifully the shoes are made. However, by erecting several boundaries, the story's female author does not push the voyeurism to its limits. First, it is only women and not men who take off and see Meng's bound feet within the story. Even though they are ordered by men and to some degree possess a male gaze following the convention, they still mediate between Meng and the emperor and work as a buffer to contain the real damage. Second, the design of two layers of female shoes prevents the maids from exposing Meng's bare feet. Finally, both her male socks and her embroidered shoes are emphasized as brand new—a detail that avoids associating anything distasteful or humiliating with the protagonist—they were in fact so “untouched by dust” 不染塵 (p. 912) that the text is compelled to explain that these shoes “were not the ones she wore when she first ran away from home” 並不是初出門穿的了, because “that pair of shoes have long been worn out by walking” 早已走破不堪穿 (p. 921) and she has been continuously changing her shoes for all these years. The subtext is unmistakable: even after so many years of cross-dressing, Meng still wears the dainty shoes inside of her male boots and, more importantly, tirelessly maintains them in good condition. The spotless shoes can be interpreted as Meng's effort to preserve her young self and keep her female identity hidden and purely intact.

If the overall scene of shoe exposure mainly utilizes the visual sense to stage the situation, Meng Lijun's reaction after waking up presents a more somatic and haptic-focused way of approaching the dramatic situation, introducing a conscious female subject. After her shoes are taken off and end up in the hands of the emperor, Meng, still drunk and unconscious, is sent home at the emperor's command. When she wakes up, gets out of bed, and “tries to take a step” 登了登 (p. 949),

⁵⁸ Li Guo understands this scene as representing female homoeroticism; it “transforms the Freudian heterosexual model of fetishism, and submits the cross-dressed protagonist to an intensely homoerotic gaze from the audience.” (See Guo, *Women's Tanci Fiction*, p. 55.) With that being said, I also would like to argue that a female gaze on a female body is different from the male gaze in the way that the two maids are also amazed by and come to appreciate it as something like talent (e.g., the skill of the exquisite embroidery, the enduring of unimaginable pain to create tiny feet).

⁵⁹ The collapse of an empathetic female community may also have something to do with the fact that the two maids do not belong to the same social class as Meng Lijun. While having bound feet is a privilege for gentry women, maids are neither required nor able to undertake the practice because of their livelihoods. Thus, Meng's tiny bound feet become a source of estrangement and fascination rather than of shared suffering and mutual empathy.

she immediately notices that her feet feel “as though she was not wearing any shoes” 似無鞋 (p. 949) and that “both the court boots and the socks had been loosened” 朝靴襪褪已俱寬 (p. 950). These descriptions perfectly demonstrate the introversion of female sensitivity: while her feet still maintain the outward appearance of wearing men’s boots, inside her embroidered shoes have been taken away, and she alone senses what has happened haptically through her delicate feet.

The narrative proceeds to accelerate and push the progression of such covert feelings out into the open. Panic upon confirming that her shoes have been lost causes Meng to vomit blood: “[Liang Suhua] only saw that the white silk cloths were scattered in front of the bed; on them, there were drops of freshly spewed blood” 只見那, 白綾腳帶散床前, 上沾著, 滴滴鮮紅一口血 (p. 952). Spitting blood is a common trope in Chinese narrative to indicate traumatic emotional distress and the immediate physiological damage inflicted on one’s health as a result of the mental burden.⁶⁰ Here, the blood materializes her mental anguish, making it visible to the characters at the scene as well as we readers. According to Javier Moscoso, “pain is a drama,” which “shares the basic form of a rite of passage,” and “mobilizes all the elements of theatrical representation.”⁶¹ In this regard, Meng’s spitting blood is totally dramatic, with a ready-made actor (Meng Lijun), a striking plot detail (spitting blood), some props (silk binding with blood), and the sympathetic audience (Liang Suhua and the reader). By materializing and staging the pain, the text is able to make Meng’s pain palpable and successfully conveys it to the readers. In particular, the blood-stained white silk closely mirrors the earlier scene of her exposed footbinding with the red embroidered shoes. The deliberately paralleled visual contrast of red on white suggests two possible interpretations: first, the embroidered shoe is such an extension of the female body that its removal is tantamount to actual injury, or at an extreme, deflowering; second, the blood splattered onto white silk operates as an attempt to compensate for the missing shoes. With such striking imagery, the text makes explicit the vulnerable and precarious state of the female body and the painful struggle to protect and live life in it. Moreover, the specificity of drops of blood on white cloth also strongly resemble menstruation—another biological marker of being a woman along with reproductive obligations. In an oblique way, by spitting blood, Meng loses control over her own body and unconsciously restores her female identity. Eventually, when nothing can be hidden anymore, the story arrives at an impasse, at which point the first author Chen Duansheng stops writing and leaves behind a suspenseful open ending.

Liang Desheng’s sequel once again shows a strong contrast in its representation of the beautification and purification of female shoes and the connection, or disconnection, of feet and dust. When reiterating the situation of shoes being stolen,

⁶⁰ Examples can be seen in Cao Xueqin’s 曹雪芹 (1715–1763) *Honglou meng*, a work written in the same historical period as *Zaisheng yuan*. In chapter 13, the male protagonist Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 spits blood when he learns of the death of Qin Keqing 秦可卿. Again in chapter 96, attributed to Gao E 高鶚 (1758–1815), the sick Lin Daiyu 林黛玉 spits blood when hearing about Baoyu getting married to another girl.

⁶¹ Moscoso, *Pain: A Cultural History*, p. 6. Also, Peter Brook argues for the significance of melodrama and its ability to provide an ethical framework for the interpretation of individual behaviors in ordinary everyday life. See Brook, *The Melodramatic Imagination*. The scene of Meng Lijun spitting blood also has a melodramatic quality as the suffering one (Meng in this case) is considered the good side who deserves our sympathy, while the one causing the suffering, the emperor, is deemed evil.

Liang's version has Meng consider that "the undershoes fell into the hands of the emperor" 褻鞋落在君王手 (p. 978), language that goes too far in implying the intimate situation of the female body and emphasizing the power of male dominance. In other cases, the idea of dust is repeatedly mentioned: when describing the situation of Meng spitting blood, the text reads "sending the emperor off, Mingtang [Meng Lijun] lay on the ground and spit blood repeatedly; we only saw the scarlet red dots in the dust" 送駕時, 明堂伏地頻頻吐, 但見那, 猩紅點點在塵埃 (p. 983); when Meng's nephew inquires about his aunt wearing a man's boots, he says "but how inconvenient the feet are; how can she wear them and tread in the dust?" 但是腳兒多不好, 怎把靴穿踏在塵 (p. 990). Certainly, *chen* 塵 (dust) can simply refer to the concept of a floor; however, adopting this vocabulary in these contexts defeats Chen Duansheng's purpose of meticulously keeping the female body clean, and makes the overall narrative appear mediocre.

FEET THAT FEEL THE PAIN

If the bound feet discussed in the previous sections are presented as beautifully finished objects, then *Zaisheng yuan* also portrays actual living feet that move and feel. Just as Dorothy Ko points out, "the reality of the practice lies not only in the screams and tears . . . on a girl's first day of binding, but also in the assiduous maintenance and care she had to lavish on her feet every day for the rest of her life."⁶² Bound feet are not realized overnight, but through a drawn-out and tedious process of daily care that requires extraordinary attention. *Zaisheng yuan* does not shy away from elaborating on female characters' sensory experience of footbinding, predominately that of pain and suffering. The fact that these descriptions of pain are written specifically for a literate female audience again points to one of the most prominent themes of the text: the question of social identity for genteel women.

A huge disadvantage of having a pair of bound feet is difficulty with standing and walking, which was also one of the major arguments used by late-Qing revolutionaries to advocate the prohibition of footbinding. *Zaisheng yuan* also notices and represents this female burden in several places. In chapter 3, when Liu Yanyu secretly enters a pavilion to save Huangfu Shaohua against her brother's will, she undergoes quite an ordeal:

Heart tormented, she suspected someone was coming as leaves trembled in the wind. Attitude hesitant, she was afraid the birds would be startled when her sleeves touched the flower branches. Steps light, she could not walk stably because the little rocks snagged her shoes. Sound muted, her long dress dragged on the ground and the jade pendant chimed. Glancing about frequently, she was afraid that the door would close in front of her. Awash with trepidation, she was more afraid [of having people hiding] in the deep grass behind her.

心惱惱, 風吹樹葉疑人至. 意遲遲, 袖拂花枝恐鳥驚. 步輕輕, 小石兜鞋行不穩. 聲悄悄, 長裙拖地佩聲鳴. 頻望望, 猶防前面門兒放. 戰兢兢, 更懼後邊草兒深. (p. 33)

⁶² Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, p. 1.

This is a good example of female feet and shoes gaining extra attention. The tension is well calibrated by a series of parallel “three-plus-seven-character” lines, which highlight Liu’s emotional anxiety and the corresponding physical movement of walking by making them separate and putting the three-character descriptions at the beginning of each sentence. The bound feet and tiny shoes become a burden in this situation, and the accurate description—such as “steps light, she could not walk stably because the little rocks snagged her shoes” points out a type of inconvenience hardly thought of by people with regular-sized feet, which must have resonated with a large portion of the female readership. Here, female feet and shoes are far from being passive objects, but part of a living and resisting body. The bound feet struggle in concert with perturbed emotions, exposing Liu’s inner world and senses to the readers.

In a similar case, when in chapter 18 Liu Yanyu runs away from home at night to avoid a forced marriage to her cousin, her feet again become a severe burden:

The young miss was sad and crying; her golden lotuses hastened across the grass. Heart anxious, mind hurried, she turned back several times to see if they were exposed. Her wet nurse carefully held her hand; they made their way stumbling. Crossing the winding path, bypassing the flowering shrubs, their skirts were dampened by the moss and the night dew. The tangled weeds almost tripped her shoes; luckily, she held on to a pine tree. In front, Jinxi [her servant] urged her to speed up; the white paper lantern shone on a red silhouette. The young miss bore the pain to move her phoenix shoes; with her tiny golden lotuses, she quickly walked several steps to get out through the garden gate.

郡主悲傷呼痛淚，金蓮促步過芳叢。心急急，意匆匆，幾度回頭怕走風。乳母輕輕扶著手，一挨一湊踏行蹤。穿曲徑，繞花叢，裙傍蒼苔夜露濃。亂草纏鞋將要絆，幸虧扶住一枝松。前邊進喜忙催促，白紙燈籠照影紅。郡主忍痛移鳳履，小金蓮，趕行幾步出園門。(p. 241)

Liu’s anxiety and worry again accompany her walking and make her escape physically challenging. The presence of her wet nurse holding her hand in support indicates both her social status as a genteel lady and the difficulty of walking alone. In the last sentence of the quote, the text directly acknowledges her feet to be in pain, which might have been exacerbated by tripping on weeds, but is most certainly directly caused by the hardship of walking on her “tiny golden lotuses.” Pain intensifies Liu’s suffering, while at the same time reminding readers that her bound feet, as a marker of her elite upbringing and gender identity, are also a source of literal pain that hinders her ability to defy those constraints and norms.

Interestingly, in chapter 64, when Meng Lijun is forced to drink excessively and becomes drunk, the text also describes her stumbling and finding it hard to walk: “Mind totally drunk, feet extremely sore, she couldn’t help but cry out that the road was too difficult” 心大醉，足深酸，不覺呼聲路好難 (p. 918). Intoxication here also signals a state of vulnerability and lowered inhibition, which seems to deepen the soreness of her feet, hinting at its being something more constant. In addition, mention of the road simultaneously draws attention to her disguised feet and also

refers to the metaphoric “path” she has embarked on by cross-dressing, foreshadowing the final revelation of Meng’s female identity. Thus, in more ways than one, the text continuously establishes a parallel between mind and feet for the female characters, as disturbances in the former always bring about discomfort and pain in the latter.

In *Zaisheng yuan*, even in normal situations women appear to have trouble standing and walking. In chapter 10, when Meng Lijun says goodbye to her sister-in-law and returns to her room, her sister-in-law reminds Meng to be cautious about walking: “She lowered her voice and said, ‘Please walk carefully; be cautious in case the tip of your shoe is trapped by the bricks along the road’” 低說姑娘須好走, 看仔細, 鞋尖兜住路旁磚 (p. 140). In chapter 28, when Liang Suhua’s foster mother tells Liang not to come to pay respects to her every day, her reason is: “The road in the garden is long and difficult to walk on. Why bother coming here every day?” 花園路遠難行走, 何必天天到此臨 (p. 369). Not only walking but even standing for long periods of time causes trouble for women. In chapter 13, when Lady Jing first meets Liang Suhua, who tried unsuccessfully to drown herself in the river, she calls the maid to pull out a seat for the guest and says: “Your golden lotuses are so tiny; how can you stand steadily?” 裙釵這點金蓮足, 看你如何站得牢 (p. 163). In chapter 64, the court maids are amazed by the tiny size of Meng’s feet and exclaim: “Hard for her, how can she even stand steadily wearing boots?” 難為她, 怎麼穿靴站得牢 (p. 922). All of these examples pay attention to women’s feet in daily life, especially the consideration women show to each other with regard to walking and standing on bound feet. These depictions again strengthen the sense of female bonding and companionship represented in the *tanci* story.

It is also worth noting that the hardship of standing, walking, or running on bound feet is often intertwined with other larger issues, mainly mental suffering, of the female subjects: Liu Yanyu’s fear of being caught, Meng Lijun’s uncertainty about the future, Liang Suhua’s trembling after the attempt at suicide, even the cross-dressed Li Mingtang’s daily struggle voiced in the court maids’ concerns—all are connected to the female bound foot. Understandably, the female author together with the female target readership are apt to notice the slightest uncomfortable feeling caused by the feet as one of the weak and vulnerable parts of their body. This leads to female bound feet emerging as the highlight or even the symbolization of female suffering in *Zaisheng yuan*.

The only example of a man showing concern for the feeling of a woman’s feet is at Liu Kuibi and Su Yingxue’s wedding ceremony:

He saw the newly wedded bride taking too long to perform the ritual, and was concerned that her phoenix feet must be in pain. He wanted to ask the servants to bring over some chairs, but was afraid that his relatives would laugh at him.

一見新人行禮久, 相憐鳳足必然疼. 欲呼左右端交椅, 猶恐諸親動笑聲. (p. 150)

Unlike Lady Jing, the male character who worries for his bride’s feet eventually takes no action because of what others might think (“afraid that his relatives would laugh at him”). This example exposes gender differences: women are able to and allowed to care for nuanced inner sensations, while men are supposed to suppress

their feelings and pay attention to external performances (e.g., of ritual, self-esteem). Moreover, it is at their wedding ceremony when a man (the groom) notices a woman's (the bride's) pain in her feet. Therefore, his imagination, which is required of him to sympathize with a woman in the first place, is directed to her tiny feet as erotic objects; the next line goes "right at the moment when he was hesitating, the pipe music sent them to the inner chamber" 正在躊躇無主意，笙歌送入洞房門 (p. 150), to be followed by lines depicting Liu's lusting after Su's beautiful body. Here, the pain in women's feet is colored by the sensual desire they arouse in men. This is not to say that men's sympathy for women cannot have a pure motivation, but considering Liu's character it just cannot be so in this case. Still, this circumstance is distinctively different from a woman-woman situation, when all sympathy is based on shared experience and understanding.

THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP AND UNSHARABLE PAIN

In discussing footbinding and female sympathy, we should not ignore the mother-daughter relationship. Dorothy Ko has already pointed out the significant role that mothers play in practicing footbinding and regards it as "a woman-to-woman tradition."⁶³ To a large extent, it is the mother's responsibility to create a pair of nicely shaped and sized feet for her daughter. To this end, in *Zaisheng yuan* and *tanci* fictions in general, the role of mother is always present in the background as a reader, a coauthor, or an inspiration. The author Chen Duansheng mentions several times that she wrote the book to entertain her mother;⁶⁴ her mother's death is one of the biggest reasons that she took a long hiatus between volume 16 and 17,⁶⁵ and later scholars have speculated that it may have impeded her from completing it.

The author's biographical details aside, in *Zaisheng yuan*, textual representations of mothers appear in several critical moments of the story, and the relationship between mother and daughter is not always harmonious considering their different attitudes toward the body, senses, and identity. The text demonstrates to us the incredible complexity of the mother-daughter relationship as well as female misunderstanding.

One prominent mother-daughter relationship, that of Su Yingxue and her mother, Meng Lijun's wet nurse, demonstrates pain as a personal sense that is hard to share with another individual, even if that person is also a woman. In chapter 10, when Meng Lijun refuses to marry Liu Kuibi and leaves the room in anger, Su Yingxue hurries to follow Meng when her mother accidentally steps on her foot:

Su Yingxue followed Meng Lijun in a hurry; frustrated, she wanted to go out of the gate. Just when the wet nurse [Su's mother] turned around and was about to grab her, she accidentally stepped on her daughter's phoenix-embroidered shoe and slender foot. Su Yingxue secretly had her own troubles;

⁶³ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, pp. 169–71.

⁶⁴ At the beginning of chapter 65, Chen wrote that "my mother liked my work and often gave comments; I therefore further indulged in my dreamlike writing" 慈母解頤頻指教，癡兒說夢更纏綿 (p. 924).

⁶⁵ Similar to the beginning of chapter 65, Chen explained the reason why she stopped writing for twelve years following the completion of chapter 16 as follows: "Ever since my mother died; I quit writing fiction with my rainbow brush" 自從憔悴堂萱後，遂使芸細彩筆捐 (p. 924).

she held her foot and began to cry. Tears continuously fell like pearls; she was crying in a sorrowful low voice. Using her fragrant handkerchief to cover her face and holding on to the door, she pressed her curved shoes with her hands and blamed her mother. Lady Dou [Su's mother] said, "It's funny; how could one step hurt you so much? What kind of trouble might you be in that you just use this as an excuse to cry over it? You should accompany Meng Lijun to her room and comfort her with nice words." Su Yingxue agreed and walked with her head bent low; not until she had cried many tears did her sorrow die down a bit.

映雪蘇娘忙伴走，惘然竟欲出堂門。乳母回身方欲扯，誤踏了，女兒鳳履腳伶仃，蘇娘暗有關心事，蹣跚著金蓮淚欲傾。點點珍珠如斷線，低低痛泣有悲聲。香羅掩面扶門立，手按弓鞋怨母親。寶氏娘娘稱好笑，如何一踏這般疼。自家有甚愁煩事，借此情由就淚淋？快伴千金房內去，好生用語勸開襟。佳人答應低頭走，淚灑千行恨略平。(pp. 127–28)

In this case again, the physical pain and the psychological pain form a parallel: Su Yingxue, on the one hand, feels sad because Meng Lijun being unable to marry Huangfu Shaohua also dooms her to being unable to marry him, as in her dreams,⁶⁶ while, on the other hand, she feels pain because her mother stepped on her fragile tiny bound foot. These two feelings interact and enhance each other; or, to be specific, the physical pain felt by the feet indexes a much larger scale of psychological pain, leading to Su's oblique reproach of her mother. But in either case, Su's mother appears to be indifferent: she not only cannot relate to her daughter's psychological pain but also shows little empathy for her daughter's physical pain that she apparently caused. It is now worth revisiting Scarry's discussion on pain. According to Scarry, because physical pain "is not *of* or *for* anything,"⁶⁷ it resists language, impedes communication, and creates an "absolute split"⁶⁸ between the person experiencing pain and the rest of the world. At the same time, psychological suffering can be expressed and understood by another person because "though often difficult for any one person to express, [it] *does* have referential content, *is* susceptible to verbal objectification, and is so habitually depicted in art that . . . there is virtually no piece of the literature that is *not* about suffering, no piece of the literature that does not stand by ready to assist us."⁶⁹ In this light, *Zaisheng yuan's* choice of having Su's mother be unable to relate to Su's pain could have several layers of understanding. First, this case demonstrates that even in the close relationship between mother and daughter, without a shared situation it is difficult for physical or psychological pain to gain sympathy from another individual person.⁷⁰ For the

⁶⁶ In chapter 2, after Huangfu Shaohua successfully shoots down the robe and wins the marriage to Meng Lijun, Su Yingxue's mother begins to worry about Su's own marriage because she will not be able to find a man as good as Huangfu Shaohua. But Su already has been secretly in love with Huangfu Shaohua. In her dreams, she even makes marriage vows with Huangfu Shaohua, which in her words makes her another Du Liniang from *Mudan ting*. See *Zaisheng yuan*, pp. 22–24.

⁶⁷ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷⁰ For a detailed discussion on shared situations, sympathy, and empathy, see Lam, *The Spatiality of Emotion*, pp. 16–17, 248n48.

physical pain, Su's mother obviously understands the cause but still predictably fails to cross the gulf between individuals, or chooses to ignore the severity of the situation. As for the psychological pain, she may not see this aspect as she does not know about her daughter's dream and affection for Huangfu Shaohua, but she definitely senses there is something going on (as she says "what kind of trouble might you be in that you just use this as an excuse to cry over it") and still chooses to stand in a position against her daughter by refusing to delve deeper, which eventually impedes the possible sharing of the pain. Moreover, having the person who steps on Su's foot be her mother could be a deliberate narrative design, as it is probable that her mother helped to bind her feet in order to maintain a body that belongs in a higher social class, wins dignity, and has a better future.⁷¹ Now as an adult, it is again her mother who instructs Su not to indulge in her own suffering at the expense of fulfilling her duty as Meng Lijun's maid and best friend. Su's mother fulfills her maternal obligation to think and give orders for the sake of her daughter, which ironically leads to the building up of barriers between mother and daughter that hinder the sharing of feelings and sensations. By emphasizing Su's mother's insensitivity to her pain, readers, especially female readers, become fully sympathetic with the character Su Yingxue because of their omniscient view and ability to share all the secrets in the characters' minds.⁷² This, in turn, strengthens annoyance and pity over the missed chance to share in and communicate the senses, and calls attention to the generation gap as one reason why the precious empathetic relationship within the same female community can be disturbed.

The mother–daughter relationship for the heroine Meng Lijun is more elaborately presented. Meng and her mother's different concerns about the body are on dramatic display in chapter 53, when the Meng family is summoned by the emperor to the court to identify whether the girl who is pretending to be Meng Lijun for her own benefit is Meng Lijun, while the real Meng Lijun is simultaneously cross-dressed as the prime minister Li Mingtang and present in the court. When Meng's father cannot decide whether or not the girl is indeed his daughter, Meng's brother first points out differences in the fake and real Meng Lijun's bodies:

⁷¹ Although Su Yingxue is only the daughter of a wet nurse and a maid for Meng Lijun, her social class is particularly high. In the beginning of the story, it is already established that Su is actually from a gentry family ("Because Lady Han pitied that she [Su's mother] used to be the wife of a literatus, she treated this wet nurse differently. She allowed her to live in the same room with her daughter, and didn't give her daughter up to be a random maid" 因憐是個書生婦, 另眼相看這奶娘。許彼娘兒同一處, 不叫輕舍小紅妝。 [p. 7]). She then becomes the best companion for Meng Lijun, and receives same-level treatment ("They [Meng Lijun and Su Yingxue] always kept each other company in the boudoir to do embroidery; she [Su Yingxue] constantly followed her [Meng Lijun] in the garden to recite poems. They loved each other and stayed in their fragrant room; they harmonized with each other and lived in the inner chamber" 常伴綠窗同刺繡, 恒隨芳徑共闌吟。相親相愛居香閣, 同意同心在內庭。 [p. 7]). Therefore, it is probable that Su also practices footbinding to the same strict degree as Meng.

⁷² Correspondingly, to attract female readers and look for those who truly understand the female author, the so-called *zhiji* 知己, is also generally considered to be one of the motivations for writing *tanci* fiction. See Bao Zhenpei, *Qingdai nüzuojia tanci xiaoshuo lungao*, p. 108.

Ah, Dad, this girl looks pretty much like my sister. But seeing her walking, I can feel she is not very stable, as if she is wearing some high-soled shoes.⁷³ My sister used to walk very stably, like a jade tree moving forward in the wind. This girl walks heavily but not lightly; I just feel her feet will stop once in a while and then move again. Also, she only half looks like my sister; probably so, she is another fake Meng Lijun.

呀，爹爹，這女子竟有四五分的一般。但是觀他行走起來，覺得不甚穩便，似乎穿高底鞋兒的模樣。妹子行來穩穩然，爭如玉樹向風前。他雖浩重非輕態，只覺得，腳下亭亭退複前。而且只惟相像半，又無非，冒名頂替一紅顏。(p. 735)

The evidence Meng's brother relies on to identify Meng is not her appearance or even her voice, but the way she walks, which indicates that the gait constitutes an essential part of representing the elite background of a girl and a recognizable marker for social distinction. As Marcel Mauss argues, the techniques of using the human body, in this case simply walking, are "assembled for the individual not by himself alone but by all his education, by the whole society to which he belongs, in the place he occupies in it," while "all these techniques were easily arranged in a system . . . a system of symbolic assemblages."⁷⁴ Pierre Bourdieu then argues that "taste" is similarly a learned pattern of behavior that seems essential and natural and hence becomes the tell-tale sign of class.⁷⁵ In the context of *Zaisheng yuan*, these statements apply to the literati gentry family background. Moreover, observation of the somatic signs and the vision-evoked haptic sense of light/heavy and stable/waddling seems to be more reliable than pure seeing/hearing. While Meng's father focuses on the appearance ("Hey Jialing [Meng's brother], don't you think they look somewhat similar?" 呵嘉齡，你看他可有些相像麼 [p. 735]) and voice ("Hey, Jialing, listen to her speaking, doesn't she sound like your sister?" 呵唷，嘉齡，你聽他的口氣，可像妹子的聲音 [p. 735]) and tends to be fooled by the fake Meng Lijun, her brother is the one who raises doubts according to the somatic signs and moves closer to the truth.

However, after the fake Meng Lijun cleverly recognizes her father and brother and verbally presents a well-crafted backstory, both male characters again become hesitant and uncertain about the identity of this girl. Contrary to the men, Meng's mother, who is later summoned to court, holds a different opinion. She looks carefully at the girl, especially her wrists and her shoes that are hidden by clothes, and says:

Hmm, this looks like a daughter from a wealthy family. Her wrists are luscious and her nails are long; with two or three jade bracelets and gold rings on them. She was spoiled and couldn't bear the pain [of footbinding], so she

⁷³ The function of *gaodi xie'er* 高底鞋兒 (high-soled shoes) is to have the feet look visually smaller and thus pretend to be tiny bound feet, which has a long history in woman's fashion. Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680) has a discussion on women wearing high-soled shoes. See Li Yu, *Xianqing ouji*, pp. 137–38. For a detailed illustration of high heels and inner high heels (*li gaodi*), see Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, p. 48.

⁷⁴ Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," p. 76.

⁷⁵ See Bourdieu, *Distinction*, part III ("Class Tastes and Life-Styles"), pp. 257–405.

wears a pair of high-sole shoes to pretend [to be a woman of gentry background]. Her body is big and tall and her face is rounded; I don't know to which wealthy family this young lady belongs.

呵唷，這倒像個有錢兒人家的女子。手腕豐肥指甲長，套著這，玉環金戒兩三雙，嬌生慣養難熬痛，穿上對，高底鞋兒妝一妝。身又魁偉容又滿，不知何處富家娘。(p. 752)

Like Meng's brother, her mother also relies on somatic particularities of a tangible body and a vision-evoked haptic experience to figure out who the girl is. Being a woman affords the possibility of getting close enough to pull up the clothes and observe the body ("to test the faker's finger, Meng's mother stretched out her hand to pull over the faker's belt; to observe the faker's shoes, Meng's mother lowered her head and pulled up the faker's skirt" 驗春蔥，伸手就將鸞帶扯；窺繡履，低頭親把彩裙挑 [p. 752]); the biological role of being a mother enables her to make the statement about the necessity of bearing the pain caused by footbinding at a young age; the social role of being a decent woman grants her the ability to conclude that this girl comes from a wealthy family but not a gentry one. These details again confirm that no one is more intimately familiar with a daughter's body transformation than the mother, especially given the experience of prolonged pain in the process—an experience that the fake Meng Lijun lacks—representing "the triumph of individual willpower and effort."⁷⁶ Everything can be falsified but the pain that has shaped the female body over time. Also note that the exact description of the pain of binding feet only appears in the part of the text with rhymed language in *tanci* fiction; this can be compared to Li Ruzhen's 李汝珍 (1763–1830) novel *Jinghua yuan* 鏡花緣 (Flowers in the mirror), where the male protagonist Lin Zhiyang's 林之洋 painful experience of forced footbinding is depicted in sufficient detail to cause a decent amount of literary blood and tears to be spilled.⁷⁷ This is also probably because footbinding is a common practice for gentry women in *Zaisheng yuan*'s time and something that needs no further explanation for female readers. The mere mention of pain, as in "she was spoiled and couldn't bear the pain," is enough to allude to the exact practice as well as showing the pride of the speaker, Meng's mother, as a high-class insider. Bearing pain, another technique of the body that is taught and learned, creates "distinction" (to use Bourdieu's notion) between a gentry woman and a commoner, or in this case to repel an attempt to forge a high social class background using money ("so she wears a pair of high-soled shoes to pretend [to be a woman of gentry background]" 穿上雙，高底鞋兒妝一妝 [p. 752]). Overall, pain reveals the truth about female identity.

However, firm denial of being the daughter of the Meng family is raised again by Prime Minister Li Mingtang/Meng Lijun, who uses eloquent language to refute the idea that she is a girl and threatens to resign her official position and leave the court. She ultimately succeeds in persuading the emperor, who refuses the Meng family's request to take Meng Lijun home as their daughter. This creates an interesting dichotomy between the gendered body and language: the body is true and the

⁷⁶ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p. 171.

⁷⁷ See Li Ruzhen, *Jinghua yuan*, chapter 33, pp. 151–52.

language is fake; Meng's mother trusts the corporeal body to tell the truth, while the men (Meng's brother, father, and the emperor) are deceived by language. As one who cross-dresses, Meng Lijun's facility with language triumphs over the thinly disguised body in order to achieve her goal of maintaining her male identity.

Furthermore, although Meng's mother is sensitive to the female experience of physical pain, she cannot sympathize with her daughter's psychological suffering, and fails to understand why Meng persists in maintaining her cross-dressed gender and why she refuses to change back to a woman, or more specifically, a wife to someone.⁷⁸ Meng's mother still approaches the whole situation with recourse to common notions of gender stereotypes:

[Meng Lijun] wears the black official's hat and robe; the sound of her boots can shake the whole city. How can this be a girl who should be putting on lipstick and powder in her boudoir? Obviously, this is a national hero who holds up the sun, shoulders the heavens, and shields the country. She is now so powerful and prestigious; no wonder she doesn't want to admit that we are her parents.

戴著烏紗掛著袍，靴聲響響城搖搖。那裡是，塗脂抹粉深閨女？分明是，捧日扶天干國豪。如此威風如此貴，自然不認二劬勞。(p. 755)

The multisensory expression with visual, auditory, even implied olfactory (lipstick and powder) elements vividly depicts the contrasting images of powerful male prime minister and gentle gentry lady.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, this time the mother's sensory imagination falls into clichéd patterns and prevents her from recognizing the truth. In fact, Meng Lijun is extremely pained after the dispute with her mother, and the short text densely employs phrases like "*an tongsuan*" 暗痛酸 (secretly feeling pain and soreness), "*shang zai*" 傷哉 (how sorrowful!), "*tong zai*" 痛哉 (how painful!), "*xinsuan lei*" 心酸淚 (bitter tears), and "*han tongqie, ren bei'ai*" 含痛切, 忍悲哀 (bearing the hurt and tolerating the sorrow) to illustrate Meng Lijun's mental anguish (see pp. 762–63). Physical pain may potentially generate sympathy within people of the same gender, but in both Su Yingxue's and Meng Lijun's cases, psychological pain goes unrecognized or is quickly dismissed by the older generation of women, leaving only the readers feeling even more sympathetic to the female characters and realizing the unbridgeable gulf between different individuals.

Intriguingly, the depiction of the mother–daughter relationship concerning body modification does not stop with Chen Duansheng but finds echoes in the sequel written by Liang Desheng. In volume 19, chapter 73, when preparing

⁷⁸ Indeed, Meng does not reject her identity as a daughter, which can be seen in her action of admitting the truth at her mother's sickbed, and her wholehearted concern for her mother's health after the episode of confrontation in the court.

⁷⁹ Meng Lijun does not admit it, but somehow the story implies that she refuses to change back to her female identity because her talent for governing a whole state will then be of no use. Uneasiness about the waste of talent is a common trope in female cross-dressing stories, which impedes female protagonists from refeminization. A later *tanci* fiction, *Bishenghua*, provides a different path for its protagonist Jiang Dehua, as she can still use her talent to assist her husband, her family, and even official affairs after refeminization.

Meng Lijun, who has returned to don female dress to be a bride, her mother and her sister-in-law have an interesting conversation:

[Lady Zhang, Meng's sister-in-law:] "Mother, your daughter is born to take an official title. Other people shouldn't be blamed for not being able to recognize her true identity. Did you forget why she doesn't have her ears pierced?" [Meng's mother:] "Ah, my daughter-in-law, it is truly strange. Your sister-in-law was spoiled when growing up. Whenever we mentioned the piercing and earrings, she would be so scared she would stop eating and drinking and almost fall ill. I adored her so much, to this day, she hasn't done the piecing. Now there is no time to waste; it is like what the old saying goes: 'Comes the time for the bride to mount the sedan chair, she hastens to pierce her ears.'" Lady Zhang, smiling, quickly found a needle and thread. Holding up her hand, pursing her red lips, she gently pricked Meng Lijun's earlobe. Meng Lijun bore the pain with tears in her eyes; her mother quickly hung beaded rings on the colorful threads.

婆婆呵，姑娘天意為官職，莫怪為入難辨清。婆婆難道忘懷了，為什麼，環眼全無在耳根？咳，呵媳婦，真的奇了，你姑娘自幼嬌養，說到穿耳帶環，即嚇得飲食不思，懨懨欲病，我便心疼得緊，所以未曾穿得，如今是顧不得了，真正俗語雲：臨時上橋忙穿耳。章夫人，笑吟吟，忙尋繡線取花針。抬玉手，抿朱唇，輕與姑娘捏耳根。千金忍痛含秋水，老夫人，忙把珠環掛彩繩。（p. 1030）

In the Qing Dynasty, women pierced their ears as a sign of femininity.⁸⁰ This passage, on the one hand, fixes a blind spot in the plot of the original story and explains why no one around Meng Lijun recognized her as a woman, while, on the other hand, it extends the narrative thread of a mother taking control of her daughter's body modification, especially when a wedding is imminent. What is worth noting here is that the two kinds of pain that haunt the relationship between Meng and her mother—physical pain related to the gendered body that Meng continuously resists or keeps hidden, and psychological pain induced by her identity struggle and the guilt she feels toward her mother—are reduced to one in this paragraph. The elaborate descriptions of the young Meng Lijun's fear of having her ears pierced and the adult Meng Lijun's actual experience of piercing bring only the physical pain to the fore, avoiding entering into her mind and thus suppressing mention of the possible psychological pain. Even the comment about Meng's being "spoiled" and fearing pain is contradictory to the original text, which emphasizes Meng's willpower when enduring the pain of footbinding. Therefore, although the sequel continues the narrative of female body modification and sensory experience, its discarding of the description of psychological pain flattens the depiction of character and simplifies the narrative of identity struggle, showing a shift of concerns from Chen Duansheng's original work to Liang Desheng's sequel. The latter segment is clearly meant to ease conflicts and present a conventional happy ending.

⁸⁰ See Liu Yang, "Chuan'er' de yanbian," pp. 97–99; Mao Liping, "Chutong: nüxing de chuan'er xisu," pp. 77–84.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates the rich representation of the female body and its sensations, especially feet and pain, in the outstanding work of *tanci* fiction *Zaisheng yuan*. Bound feet are a major recurring theme in the story, which not only reinforce gender stereotypes and practices but also create interpretive spaces in which to evaluate and reflect on those gender norms. The binary formulation of ascribing “gold lotuses” and the sense of touch to women, and boots associated with the sense of hearing to men, hints at the different types of bodily sensitivity of different gendered experiences. Along with pain, which creates the bound feet, other haptic senses described as light or soft are also closely tied to the female bodily experience.

In the story, the female characters’ feet are often exposed in two circumstances. The first is active and voluntary, whether to prove one’s hidden female identity or to preserve it in a painting as a memento. Here, the action itself can be said to showcase female agency and attempts to seize autonomy. The second type of exposure is passive and involuntary: women’s bound feet are gazed upon by male viewers, or unwittingly revealed to palace maids. Because the reception of the gaze is unexpected and forced, aside from the hinted-at physical pain of creating the bound feet, psychological pain also emerges as one of the crucial themes in the story, and toward the end of the original story gains its extreme representation when the heroine Meng Lijun spits blood on her binding cloth.

Besides showing female feet as finished works of art waiting to be discovered, viewed, and even possessed, *Zaisheng yuan* also devotes significant narrative effort to representing bound feet as belonging to living and breathing female bodies that can seize control and express their sense of agency. In this respect, the textual representations of bound feet become inseparable from detailing the various experiences of pain and calibrating the symbolic meanings behind them. For example, we saw the ways in which walking and standing can become huge burdens for female characters, while sympathy for these burdens best demonstrates ideas of female understanding and companionship befitting the genre of *tanci* fiction. However, when it comes to a subcategory of female companionship, the mother–daughter relationship, the text complicates those assumptions underlying genre and female writing by depicting scenes of failed mutual understanding and empathy. Although she controlled her daughter’s painful physical transformation (footbinding) in childhood, the mother is surprisingly not so relevant in the adult daughter’s mental struggles. Also, the court scene in which recognition of Meng Lijun’s physical body by her mother is overridden by Meng Lijun’s own eloquent language not only indicates that a motherly instinct will eventually lose to fatherly rhetoric, but also insinuates that the writing of *tanci* is another deceptive word game that will eventually fail to help, let alone resolve, real-life suffering. Perhaps this could be regarded as one of the reasons why Chen Duansheng eventually gave up finishing the story.⁸¹

Without generalizing too much about *tanci* fiction as a whole, it seems beyond question that *Zaisheng yuan* is particularly representative of works of and for

⁸¹ Guo Moruo supports the argument that the realities of life for women in terms of pain and suffering are beyond the capacity of a written genre such as *tanci* to resolve, speculating that it is the unavoidable tragic ending that prevented Chen Duansheng from finishing the story. See Guo Moruo, “*Zaisheng yuan* qian shiqi juan.”

women. It offers detailed and nuanced accounts of female experience, is eager to examine and address female concerns, shows skepticism toward female gender identity, and explores gender-specific pain—one of the most acute but private senses of the human body—both physically and psychologically. While female bound feet caused pain in the body when standing or walking, *tanci* suggest that a female mind will forever be pained by conflicting social roles and by frustration with the difficulty of sharing feelings between mother and daughter. It is indeed the pain of bound feet that brings the female characters, especially Meng Lijun, close to female readers, and consolidates this imagined community of gentry women.

Pain, both physical and psychological, provides a framework for women to make sense of the world, identify themselves, and interpret the possibilities and limitations of their existence. As Dorothy Ko argues, “pain is not only a destructive but also a productive force.”⁸² The exquisite pain of footbinding determines the introverted tendency of female experience and is recognized by both genders as the kernel of female identity; the shared physical pain of footbinding helps women sympathize with each other and find allies; the failed empathy and the impenetrability of psychological pain again reminds them of the limitations of female companionship, or the solitary nature of individual experience. Pain defines a woman from body to mind, shaping the way she views and engages in her everyday life experience in early modern China.

Weaving such a lengthy and convoluted story, Chen Duansheng still does not have answers to every question she brings up. But even though the text will perish and the story will become outdated, yet the pain will stay—felt, understood, and lamented by female readers for generations to come.

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⁸² Ko, “The Subject of Pain,” p. 478.

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