Women's Writing
Before and Within
the "Hong lou meng"

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It is a greater joy to see the author's author, than himself.
—Emerson, "Nominalist and Realist"
... the subtilest of authors, and only just within the possibility of authorship.
—Emerson, "Shakspeare; or, the Poet"

Educated women who compose poetry are prominent in Cao Xueqin's novel Hong lou meng (Dream of the red chamber; ca. 1750)—so prominent, in fact, that Yuan Mei thought the book must have been inspired by himself and his poetry-writing coterie of women.¹ But historians of women's literature in China are unlikely to approach Cao's novel with Yuan Mei's confident realism. The poems composed by Lin Daiyu, Xue Baochai, Li Wan, and other female characters in the novel are not raw data to be transcribed directly into the history of women's writing; rather, they need to be interpreted in light of character, context, plot, topoi, allusion, thematic statements about women, and so forth. When due allowance has been made for the mediations of Cao's literary technique, I think we can find in the Hong lou meng a sustained reflection on the place and chances of women in Chinese literary history—and see in this reflection not merely an incidental theme but one of the master tropes of that complex book.

The poems themselves are not particularly difficult, but learning
how to read them in context is—as this chapter will show—no simple matter. The novel's structure provides some guidance. Twice in the novel a young girl's writing of poetry is associated with the motif of "lantern-riddles" (déngqí), the festive compositions presented in social gatherings on the fifteenth night of the first lunar month, and both times the expected thickness of the riddle hides a deeper irony. The recurrence of similar events in different circumstances or with different personnel is a mainstay of Cao Xueqin's fictional technique, a form of hermeneutic algebra through which the reader is invited to evaluate the constant motifs in terms of variable ones and vice versa. Just as in life outside the novel, the return of the new year provides an opportunity of measuring progress and change.

Gardens, Categories, and Anthologies

The topic of women's writing opens with a bang in chapter 18. The first woman to take up brush and inkstone in the book is, strikingly, the highest-ranking woman and the one least available for male inspection: the Jia family's daughter Yuanchun, who, on a visit from the palace where she is an imperial concubine, wishes to leave behind a verse record of the event. After composing a few decorous lines, she commands her younger male and female kin to extemporize poems on the subject of the garden, specially constructed for her visit and subsequently known as the Daguan (Grand purview) Garden. This command is jokingly cast as an examination theme and leads into some timeworn test folklore. The episode suggests a polarity characteristic of many of the Hong lou meng's themes: taking exams, that most serious occupation of the real outside world of adult gentry men, is reproduced in miniature as an amusement for a society of small girls and boys. In the same way, of course, the garden reproduces the world outside it (with Jia Baoyu its freedom-loving emperor), and Jia Xichun's painting reproduces the garden: each time the simulacrum is (or briefly seems to be) a perfected and purified version of the real thing, with day-to-day interests and conflicts removed. Women's writing, on the evidence of this episode, simply mimics the male literary life, but in the mode of non-purposive fantasy. Jia Tanchun and Lin Daiyu express precisely this view in the course of the poetry lesson of chapter 48 (PLM, 2:667).

And such was, in fact, the view expressed by many writers who, in the previous century or so, had remarked on the relatively new phenomenon of published women. When the famous poet and former courtier Liu Rushi compiled, around 1650, the notices on women poets in her husband Qian Qianyi's anthology of Ming verse Lichao shiji, her women writers entered literary history alongside monks, Japanese, Koreans, Daoists, eccentrics, spirits, nameless persons, stelae, and servants. This seemingly ramshackle collection of groups is unified by their common cultural marginality. The organization of the anthology as a whole is patterned on that of the dynastic histories, starting with poems by members of the Ming imperial lineage and moving progressively downward and outward from nobles to officials to commoners. Menka, Japanese princes, dead people, stone pillars, and women poets were alike in standing far from the magnetic "center" so clearly defined by birth, rank, and office. And, what is more significant for seventeenth-century modes of literary evaluation, no author in these groups would normally have sat the examinations. Hence Liu and Qian's decision to collect them into an "intercalary" or "supplementary" section.

UCanical persons live on in the subcanonical sections of Liu and Qian's book, and it was with a kindred gesture of simultaneous rivalry and concession that Wang Duanshu entitled her anthology of female poets Mingshan shiju (The weft-canon of poems by renowned women, 1667). Jing, the term for a Confucian classic and, most relevantly, the Shi jing or Canon of Poetry, suggests verticality, permanence, and the warp of a fabric; we, Wang's term, refers not only to the horizontal linking threads of a weaving but also to the extra-canonical, unrecognized, or apocryphal texts that fill in the gaps of the official record.

The most conspicuous defining trait of women's writing was, for these observers and apparently for the Cao Xueqin of chapter 18, its position outside serious masculine pursuits. The late Ming publisher Zhao Shijie introduced a volume of women's verse with comparisons drawn from the realm of leisurely delight:

This book is like an immense shop where pearls, ornaments, clothes, and every kind of curiosity are spread out. Open the book: left and right you encounter fresh springs, is it not delightful? There is no need [for women poets] to "carve feathers and tree-leaves" [i.e., become specialist scholars] or to "harness the winds and ride the clouds" [i.e., achieve success in the examinations] in order to create a grand literary purview [zhimein daguan].
A minority view (predating the consensus of opinions just cited) is
given by Yu Xian’s preface to the anthology Shu xiu zougji (Collected
poems by women of purity and beauty; ca. 1570).

Among the ancients, the verse of women was found both in royal
palaces and in common lanes and alleys, because it was held to have
a direct relation to morals and government. After the Three Great
Dynasties, teaching of and by women fell into disuse. Only under the
Tang, when officials were selected on the basis of their ci and fu com-
positions, did the wind of literary inspiration return to move the
beauties of the inner courtyard. (quoted in Hu Wenkai, 881)

If the notion of the ladies of the Jia family constituting a miniature lit-
erary academy reinforces the major theme of the artistically ordered
world in Cao’s novel, ideas about women’s literary talent in general,
especially in the form they had taken by the early Qing, may well have
helped define that theme.

Unwitting Yongwu

Poems occurring in novels are always framed by character and
event, taking them out of context makes for a partial interpretation at
best. The poems of X are brought to our attention as examples of the
kind of poetry X would write, an indication of the sort of person she
is.9 But when, as so often in the Hong lou meng, X’s words mean some-
thing other than what they say, they become oddly hollow in the im-
mediate context and point to the remoter purposes of X’s author, the
author of the plot. Between these two frames of reference—what the
writing character knows and expresses, and what the narrator and
the careful reader find expressed in the character’s writing—lies the
possibility of adequately formulating what authorship (women’s
authorship included) means in the Hong lou meng.

Some chapters after Yuanchun’s visit on the Lantern Festival of
the first month, a letter arrives from the palace requesting versified
riddles from the Concubine’s younger sisters, brothers, and cousins.
Once again, the command parodies the official exams in a domestic
and coeducational setting, with a female “emperor” as examiner. If
the mimicry of the examination system—an anticipation, in the minor
key of play, of the all-important examination that concludes the
novel—shows Cao’s awareness of discussions of women’s authorship
over the previous century and a half, the verse-riddles composed in
response to Yuanchun’s second command can be read as a critical
backward glance on the history of women in Chinese literature (“in” it
as authors and as subject matter). The riddles unfold during the fa-
mous party scene of chapter 22. For her opening riddle, the Imperial
Concubine writes (in Hawkes’s translation):

  At my coming the devils turn pallid with wonder.
  My body’s all folds and my voice is like thunder.
  When, alarmed by the sound of my thunderous crash,
  You look round, I have already turned into ash.
  —An object of amusement.

One of Yuanchun’s younger, unmarried sisters, Tanchun, con-
tributes the following:

  In spring the little boys look up and stare
  To see me ride so proudly in the air.
  My strength all goes once the bond is parted,
  And on the wind I drift off broken-hearted.
  —An object of amusement.10

The answers to the riddles are “firecracker” and “kite”: festive
objects due to their association with the New Year and Qingming fes-
tivals and so suitable topics for festive vers de société. But Jia Zheng,
father of both women and here the master of ceremonies, is unable to
dismiss the suggestions of early death and abandonment hidden in
every verse and, after hearing a few more riddles in the same mourn-
ful vein, goes off to be alone with his melancholy.

Readers have long seen the episode as ironic: feast turning to fu-
nal, gladness turning to misfortune. “Against all expectation, lan-
tern riddles conceal words of foreboding.”11 This irony would seem to
be firmly in the service of the novel’s plot, a machinery of ends and
means in which no fictional character counts for much (for such is the
meta-dramatic force of the word qiao, “against all expectation” but
also “as if by design”). Irony of this type comes admittedly rather
cheap, for knowledge of the future is as rare among fictional charac-
ters as it is among the rest of us. But there is more than one kind of
irony at work. As one of the novel’s nineteenth-century readers put it,
“Each riddle is nothing but its author’s self-portrait.”12 If the authors
of these riddles are able to compose self-portraits unwittingly, that
sounds like a more potent irony—since we like to think the inability to
know what will happen to one in the future is more widespread than
the inability to recognize one’s “self-portrait,” especially a portrait one
has painted oneself.
The history of women in Chinese literature helps to explain the irony at all its levels, showing both why the versifiers are able to compose self-portraits without knowing what they are doing, as well as why the composition of such verse should turn a lively festival into an anticipation of loss. To understand the language of the Jia daughters’ riddles, one has to look back to the tradition of descriptive palace-style poetry (gongti sici), a genre whose specificities are closely intertwined with the question of the representation of women. In the formative early collection of palace-style poetry, the Yu tai xin yong (New songs from a jade terrace; ca. 545), a “feminine” voice (“feminine” by convention, and probably sometimes in the body too) often speaks with exemplary decorum in an allegorizing mode. The subgenre that classifies such poetry is called yonggu sici, or “poems in praise of objects.” Now, in a trivial sense the lantern-riddles are “about objects,” but the generic properties of yonggu sici are more exacting. A few examples will show how a coded femaleness works together with the technique of descriptive allegory to produce a “praise of objects” that is about anything but “objects” per se.

Fu Yuan: “Song of the Autumn Orchid”

Autumn orchids hang over a pool of jade.
The pool’s water is pure and fragrant.
Hibiscus flowers open with the wind,
And on the pool float a pair of mandarin ducks.
Fish pairs leap and thrash.
Bird couples now and again rise and return.
Sir, you promised after nine autumns
To share a quilt with your lowly concubine.13

This is not strictly speaking a yonggu poem, but the allegorical purpose of the description is clear enough. Every element of the landscape translates into an emblem of sexual desire: to read the poem correctly, one would have to suspend the literal meanings of each word in favor of the acquired associational meanings. Now for some more obvious examples of the genre.

Gao Shuang: “Praise of the Mirror”

When first it ascended the Phoenix Courtyard,
this mirror shone on moth-like eyebrows.
It says: I shine on lasting trust,
on eternal longing.
Having no hidden motives, it does not choose its meetings;

pure and brilliant, it is incapable of deceiving.
And so this wordless object will observe (as always) my next rendezvous.14

Xie Tiao: “Five Poems in Praise of Things, Number 4”

As elegant as the Vermilion Railings;
As proudly rising as the Yuan Gate tower.
Paired phoenixes hold it in midair, pure and cold;
From suspended dragons it dangles as a bright moon.
In it are reflected the patting and rubbing-on of rouge,
The insertion of flowers deep in cloudy hair.
In vain do I observe this jade-like beauty;
I always fear your feelings, sir, may come to an end.15

Liu Xiaoyi: “In Praise of Stone Lotus”

My name is “Lotus”: it is capable of a million deeds,
My surname is “Stone”: it is worth a thousand ounces of gold.
If you haven’t understood this unfeeling thing,
How can you claim a human heart?16

The poems cited above—and there are hundreds more like them—have in common with the poems of chapter 22 of the Hong lou meng a riddling evocation of an object and the secondary evocation, through that object, of another object. All these poems are double allegories—that is, when you get past the first layer of allegory, you still have a second layer to deal with. In yonggu poetry the object sung is always double: the poem is about a mirror, a candle, a mat, a painted fan, a pen, a flute, a dance, but also about that object as a rebus for another object, the object par excellence of this kind of poetry, namely, woman. One would hardly bother to enumerate the properties of an object in a yonggu poem if those properties could not be somehow applied to an erotic plot. (As for that erotic plot itself, it is a matter of record that many of these “feminine” poems were written by men.)

Gongti sici is inseparably associated with the name and tastes of Emperor Jianwen of the Liang (r. 550–51), a noted aesthete and admirer of female beauty. From its origins in the courts of the Liang and Tang periods, palace-style verse restricted itself largely to the evocation of beautiful women in states of languor and longing. With its set themes and studiously unadventurous evocation of pleasing surfaces, such verse went well with a palace environment, it has been suggested, because there was little in it that could be found offensive or
praise. Women can write about any subject, or, rather, they can convince themselves they can write about any subject, but the knowing reader will transform their writing into yonggu poetry, a poetry of objects and of the transformation of selves into objects. Praise of women poets in such terms inescapably trivializes them and equips the reader with the spectacles of what cinema specialists would call a “male gaze,” or, to do honor to the present context, an emperor’s harem-surveying gaze.19 To write, all unawares, in a variant of the yonggu mode is to reproduce the history and structure of “women’s literature”—literature that, even when it is said to have been produced by women, inevitably returns, as to its source, to the topos “woman.” Literature about women surrounds, frames, is the decisive context for, literature by women; writing by women merely instantiates what has already been said about women. If this is so, then Cao’s generalization of the yonggu formula suggests that the masculinization of women’s literature is not to be distinguished from the possibilities of women’s literature itself—a highly suspicious conclusion, especially coming from a man who produces counterfeits of women’s writing.

For Fan, Read Author

The meaning of the episode may be that there is no women’s literature—yet. Maybe women’s literature will happen when women who write come to understand the genre they are (already) writing in. Or it may be that women’s literature needs to be recovered from the imposing scrap heap of literature about women, and this still lies in the future. Jia Zheng’s reading of the lantern-riddles does, after all, redirect our attention from the poems’ subject matter to their authors, which is a first step toward undoing the objectification endemic to the palace style. But that reading is itself required by the erotic plot of the yonggu subgenre. “I might as well be a candle, or a fan, or a stone lotus, for all the difference it makes,” says the conventional speaker of a yonggu poem, but underneath the descriptive language of palace-style poetry, there is a hidden woman whom the right reading will set free—perhaps with a kiss as in the fairy tales. Such poetry in the “feminine” voice requires a male reader. If, as Wen Yiduo suggests, the yonggu poetry of objects is displaced or alienated poetry of persons, it now appears to us as a gendered poetry that

partisan. The theme of longing could, at the utmost limit of interpretation, be paraphrased as an expression of the official’s desire to serve his lord. This form of poetry has been denounced as decadent many times through the ages. Courtier poetry is minor poetry: it runs counter to that strand of literati values that prizes moral seriousness and dignifies the poet as the maker of admonishments, not amusements, for his ruler. The accusations drawn up by the modern poet and essayist Wen Yiduo strike me as particularly thought-provoking, for they get at the rhetorical foundations of the yonggu style:

One form of the perversity [of gongti shu] is its tendency to seek satisfaction in things, not in people. Thus embroidered collars, cummerbunds, wooden clogs, headrests, mats, bedroom furniture, etc., all take on a life of their own and indeed become infected [by the poet’s emotions]. Then comes the turn of lamps and candles, jade steps, dust in the rafters, to step forward and abet the poets in their efforts to concentrate their ideas and reach the burning point of absurdity. . . . As we observe these tendencies, we must wonder whether such writing counts as poetry, or should be termed a kind of artificial and shameless pursuit of satisfaction. Under such conditions, how can one hope for good poetry? One expressed in the faded platitudes and set formulas of the palace style, poems themselves can hardly have been more impressive or interesting than their themes. To tell the truth, oftentimes these poets’ art consists, not in writing poetry, but in devising themes. . . . Poems became the servants of their titles.17

The art of poetry an ancilla to the art of making up themes, humans in thrall to insistent props and things—Wen Yiduo diagnoses palace-style poetry with a variant of the satiric topos “the world turned upside down.” But the reader of yonggu poetry, if he is to be a good reader (“if you can’t understand this unfeeling thing . . .”), automatically turns the poem right side up. The generic expectation of yonggu poetry is that, by describing a thing, one will describe oneself—whereby, of course, one describes oneself as thing.18 That is, of course, exactly what the amateur poets of Hong lou meng, chapter 22, are doing: they are writing perfectly accurate and conventional yonggu poetry, although without being aware of doing so. Only Jia Zheng, whom one would expect to be a stern critic of the palace style, discovers the generic switch and applies the right model to obtain the appropriate reading of the poems. As a reflection on women’s poetry, this is not entirely unmixed
for complex stylistic and historical reasons, can only bring its male writers and readers “satisfaction” if it is given voice through a fictional woman.

Scratch an object, and you will uncover a woman; scratch the woman, and you will discover a man. “Women’s literature” does not seem to be getting closer to existence through the efforts of Cao Xueqin. I think, however, that if we scratch the man, we will uncover another woman, the real author of the young woman’s plot of erotic indirectness. The founding reference for this kind of poem is Ban Jieyu’s (born ca. 48 B.C.) “Yuan xing” (Song of reproach), a short poem reprinted in every anthology of court poetry, in which this lady-in-waiting narrates the making of a round silk fan and concludes:

Yet always it fears the coming of autumn,
When cold winds snatch away blazing heat;
Negligently dropped into a basket,
It sees favor and passion cut off in mid-course.

Ban Jieyu’s little poem is not, I think, a young woman poem but the necessary condition for young woman poetry: the generic qualities of the later “poems in praise of objects” derive from this poem by inversion and rotation. The main difference between Ban Jieyu’s poem and the poems that descend from it is to do with the purpose of talking in a language of objects in the first place. Ban Jieyu’s poem is about having been treated unjustly (it expresses yuan, reproach); everyone would have known that she was an imperial concubine sent into retirement after the deaths of her children. Her choice to let the fan speak for her is an ethical one, expressive of an exemplary (feminine or gentlemanly) restraint. We also have her narrative treatment of the same themes in fs form, but it is far more rarely anthologized or imitated. In contrast, the language repudiated by Wen Yiduo and so many others is a language of coyness. In Ban Jieyu’s poem, the fact that a fan’s career could be treated as equivalent to a human’s was a powerful means of ethical condemnation, whereas the palace-style poetry of objects avoids the ethical register altogether. To go from Ban Jieyu’s short poem to the later poetry in praise of objects is to move from reproach (yuany) to praise (yong), from allegory to fetishism. Young woman poetry reads or misreads Ban Jieyu’s complaint as a renewed erotic invitation, and it turns the specific personal reproach of her poem into the stance of a generalized and indefinitely adaptable poetic persona.

Poems in praise of objects are, if this hypothesis is correct, in a certain sense unreadable unless we understand them as deliberate transformations of this particular poem. Young woman poetry, we discover, is founded on the reversal of the meanings of a woman’s literature, insofar as we take Ban Jieyu’s poem to be the precedent-setting “woman’s poem.” Jia Zheng’s reading of his daughters’ lantern-riddles performs this rite of return, too. He detects the subtext of complaint in their descriptive language of celebration. He reads their poems as variants on the young woman genre and as laments by the cast-off woman who might as well be a silk fan in autumn. The two meanings of the phrase “women in literature” are connected here by an irony—not just the dramatic irony that stems from a speaker’s ignorance of the future, but a stylistic irony proceeding from the misrecognition of one genre as another. The Jia girls thought they were writing in imitation of the palace mode, the male trope on the original female poem, but the alert reader sees them, to his grief, as Ban Jieyu’s unwilling companions.

A Female Historian

A second example—one called to our attention by the novelist himself, through its parallels to chapter 2—is the set of ten “Poems Remembering the Past” composed by Xue Baqin in preparation for another New Year’s celebration. First, however, a word about Baqin’s role in the novel. At this point in the story, the main amusement of the young inhabitants of the Grand Purlieu Garden is their poetry club. Baqin, a new arrival, has lost no time in announcing herself as a competitor in the garden’s ond’raining contest of wit—“not just a poetry-writing contest,” as Shi Xiangyun puts it, “but a fight to the death!” (HLM 50; 2: 693). (The exaggeration is characteristic of Xiangyun, but jokes and fictions in this book have a way of turning serious.) The struggle among the women for intellectual leadership is also, unmistakably, a contest for the attentions of Baoyu, the pleasure-loving heir of the Jia family. Baqin’s star is on the rise. In chapter 50, her verses on plum flowers are the most admired, despite the fact that she is the youngest poet in the group. (I shall return to this poem below.) Spying her on a plum-branch-collecting expedition with Baoyu, Grandmother Jia has called her even prettier than the woman in one of her treasured Qiu Ying pictures (HLM 50; 2: 697, 700). Such a comparison, though made by a third person, virtually guarantees Baoyu’s erotic interest in Baqin, and sure enough, before the end of the chap-
ter the matriarch has begun to examine her as a possible marriage partner for her grandson.  

Baoqin’s family story closely resembles that of her chief competitor, Lin Daiyu: both are orphans, both have seen a lot of the world, and both have benefited from an education normally reserved for boys. The momentary highlighting of Xue Baoqin thus yields information that a careful reader will apply to the “case,” as it were, of the more important Lin Daiyu, and more specifi cally to Daiyu’s chances of marriage with Baoyu. We know from the novel’s occasional hangings back to the supernatural realm that Daiyu’s earthly career follows from her earlier existence as a fairy flower: watered in that realm by the sentimental Stone, she now owes a “debt of tears” to the Stone’s incarnation, the boy Baoyu. Baoqin’s flowering-plum poem recalls fairyland, too, suggesting a complicity between the two talented girls:

Surely in a former life you grew on the Jasper Terrace!  
No more will your appearance cast me into doubt.

The greatest difference between the two cases—the fact that Baoqin has already been promised to the son of Mr. Mei of the Hanlin Academy whereas Daiyu’s marital fate remains undecided—refers back to Baoqin’s plum-blossom poetry, giving it, and the whole episode, a new meaning: for the surname Mei is written with the character “plum.” The plum tree bears ancient and familiar sexual connotations. The poem “Biao you mei” (Mao shi 20) characterizes a late-marrying woman as a plum tree loaded with overripe fruit. The plum is the first tree to flower but the last to bear fruit. Baoqin’s precocity identifies her with the plum flower, but her future is that of the late-bearing tree. Her poetry is thus doubly plum poetry and perfectly reproduces the rules of the yangue mode: poetry about plum branches by a personied plum tree. Like the objects encoded in the riddle poems of chapter 22, the plum tree with its associations furnishes a bridge between poetry and prose, between the limited knowledge expressed by the character and the more extensive knowledge of the narrator. The ancient emblem allows Cao to imprint a seemingly inescapable pathos on the depiction of this character: it is because of her early flowering that Baoqin is doomed to a late or impossible marriage, the confluence of motifs seems to suggest, and the ample literature on ill-fated girls of genius would make the conclusion hard for a contemporary reader to avoid.
6. "Peach Leaf Ford"

When withered grasses and dormant flowers are reflected in the shallow pool,
Peach branches and peach leaves must separate forever.
The grand officials of the Six Dynasties all come to this:
A little portrait vainly hung high up on the wall.
(The favorite concubine of the famous calligrapher Wang Xianzhi of the
Jin dynasty was named Taoye, "Peach Leaf." The site of their parting, on
the Qinhuai River near Nanjing, was later called "Peach Leaf Ford.")

7. "Green Mound"
The Black River overflows and sob, not wishing to
roll on;
A touch of the icy strings brings forth all the sadness
of a song.
The Han sovereign's policy is indeed unendurable harsh:
Let that "wood unfit for use" suffer eternal shame.
(Green Mound, a hill near the city of Hohhot in present-day Inner Mongolia,
was said to be the tomb of Wang Zhaojun, a palace lady sent by the
Han emperor Yuandi to serve the king of the barbarian Xiongnu as wife
and political hostage. For her story, see Han shu 94b, "Xiongnu zhuang,"
and Han han shu 119, "Nan Xiongnu zhuang." "Wood unfit for use" is
proverbial for a scoundrel, in this case the court painter Mao Yanshou,
whose disappointment at not receiving a bribe was the reason for Zhao-
jun's exile.)

8. "Mawei"

A still face blotted over with cosmetic and dyed
with shining sweat—
Her gentleness has now faded into the eastern sea.
But the memory of her beauty ensures
That her grave clothes even today give off perfume.
(Yang Guifei, the favorite concubine of Emperor Ming of the Tang, was
held to be responsible for his neglect of government. When, in the wake of
a rebellion in 755, the court was forced to flee to Sichuan, the imperial
guard mutinied at Mawei and refused to go on until Yang Guifei and her
brother had been executed.)

In striking contrast to most of the poetry in the novel, Baqin's ten
poems have attracted little critical commentary. The reader (or readers)
from Cao's circle of intimates known to us from the so-called Zhi-
yanzhai annotations said nothing about them, a cause for regret not
only in itself but also because Zhiyanzhai's observations so often
spurred subsequent readers to study and discuss a passage. The anon-
ymous nineteenth-century Du Hong lou meng sudi passes over the
poems in favor of the conversation that follows them; likewise, the edi-
tors of the standard modern edition of the novel limit themselves to
saying, "Perhaps the author of the narrative had some other allegori-
ical meaning in mind" (HLM 51: 2: 706n1). Of the older commentators,
only Wang Mengruan gave a key for each poem. For him, the ten
taken together narrate (sometimes in the vaguest of terms) the Man-
chu conquest of China—just as Cao Xueqin's purpose in writing the
whole book, according to Wang, was "to set down in veiled terms a
history of the beginnings of the Qing dynasty."
"He created an imagi-
nary family and put words in the mouths of boys and girls, pretend-
ing to talk of feelings in order to record historical facts." 31

More recently, Liu Genglu has offered an interpretation of the po-
ems that echoes Wang Mengruan's in focus if not in import. The first
poem, a meditation on the river battle at Red Cliff, "with its chilly and
tragic tone may very well be an indirect allusion to the Jia family, this
seemingly indestructible feudal family that is doomed to pull its own
house down in internal conflicts." The poem on Peach Leaf, mournful
and full of regret, "has much in common with the Rong [branch of the
Jia family] in its coming decay, marked by death and separation of
every kind." The poem on Green Mound dared to accuse the Han em-
peror of harsh policies: "So, too, the tragic fates of the beauties of the
Grand Purview Garden derive from the corruption of the men of the
Jia household." The depiction of Yang Guifei "is like a shadow cast by
the depravities of the Ning and Rong branches [of the Jia family]."
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Once again, the analogies may be strained, but the point of interpret-
ing is the same. As did Wang Mengruan's, Liu's exigesis leaps over
the poems' putative author, Baqin, and settles on the author's
author—Cao Xueqin—whose purposes in writing them crowd hers
right out of the reader's field of vision.

The pattern of readings that forms around the lantern-riddles of
chapter 22, the plum poems of chapter 50, and the poems on history of
chapter 51 suggests a tacit poetics of the fictive "female voice" in the
Hong lou meng. Women authors write yanggu, poems on objects that
are given meaning by their reference to the self (a self predominantly
defined by marriage). If a poem written by a female character is not
interpretable according to the conventions of yanggu, it is to be read
not in light of the woman author and her motivations but in light of
those of the narrator. Baqin's poems form a perfect test case of the
second possibility: since she is only lightly worked into the novel's
plot, her poems are of necessity freestanding in a way that Lin Daiyu’s, for example, are not. Her role in the novel is thus almost exclusively defined by her femininity and her literary talent. And her poems, for that reason, go unread or nearly so.

The one reader whom I see as forming an exception to this pattern, the modern critic Cai Yijiang, helps define the limits of the yangyu mode and suggests a broader vision on Cao Xueqin’s part. Cai gives Baqin herself credit for poems whose melancholy tone “reflects, in an indirect way, her own family, which [since her father’s death] is on the way downhill.” And Cai points out one crucial difference between the lantern-riddles of chapter 22 and those of chapter 51. Each of Baqin’s “Poems on the Past” contains the name of a common object. “Everyone tried to guess what they were, but no one guessed right,” says the narrator (HLM 51; 2:710). Possible answers suggested by the commentators Zhou Chun, Xu Fengyi, and Wang Xilian include meat, a trumpet, a rabbit, a flute, a fan, a chamber pot, a toothpick, willow catkins, and a plumb line. But how, asks Cai, can the solutions to these unanswerable poems be such simple everyday objects, when in earlier chapters riddles on similar themes had given the children of the Jia family no trouble at all? The unusual unperceptiveness of Baqin’s immediate audience suggests that both the characters and the critics may have taken a wrong turn, and that the model for these riddles must not be the easily decoded poems in the yangyu mode of chapter 22 but the rebuses and punning verses Baoyu found so incomprehensible on his visit to fairyland in chapter 5. If those riddles were beyond Baoyu’s ability, it was for a good reason: for to decipher them is to uncover the fates of all the women in the garden. Baqin’s poems on the past, Cai concludes, are best read as laments for the present and future: the “Peach Leaf” poem with its theme of separation anticipates Yingchun’s departure in chapter 99, the “Green Mound” poem refers to Xiangling (Xinglian), sold into captivity, and so forth. Some of Cai’s readings are contestable, but their structure announces something new: through them, Baqin’s poems no longer reveal an exteriorized self but tell the fates of others; and instead of revealing the gap separating a character’s consciousness from the narrator’s consciousness, they present the character’s awareness as equivalent to the author’s. Such poems would invert the hierarchies, both of gender and of genre, on which the composition of yangyu poetry depends. If Cai is right, Baqin’s degree of authorship—her literary originality, as well as her author-like insight into the developing plot of the novel she inhabits—is, I think, unequaled by any other character in the Hong lou meng. Not bad for an imaginary woman! But there is a further dimension to the visionary poetics of her language, this time a generic one.

**Female Histories**

Perhaps the Hong lou meng spoils its readers for wonders. Next to stones that transmute into little boys, magical mirrors, ghostly visitations, and the exquisite workings of intermundial karma, the fact that a young girl chooses to write in a genre so conventionally masculine as the heroic meditation on the past does not strain credulity. The concerns of the “poems on history” genre, however, repeat and reverse some of the distinguishing characteristics of the tacitly gendered poem on objects; writing a poem on history might be the most direct way for a woman poet to step out of the special hermeneutic circle that for readers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries constructed “women’s literature” as an annex to the existing literature about women.

Poems on objects are courtly amusements, but the poem on the past is as serious a genre as Chinese poetry possesses. If the poem on objects turns on a riddling depiction of its (implicitly female) speaker, the poem on history is by definition a writing about others. What others could be more definitively “other” than the dead? Moreover, these others are people, not objects that substitutively emblematize the self: anyone who scrutinizes a huang (cherishing the past) poem for traces of self-portraiture (an expectation enshrined in the phrase huang gu shang jin, “cherishing the past and bemoaning the present”) will find it in the speaker’s expressions of verbal sociability (praise, pity, condemnation, and so forth). The speaker takes shape before the reader as an ethical center from which relations to historical figures emerge. That center is generically masculine; a serious genre would not require the Ming or Qing poet to put on a disguise, and most poets were after all men. Not infrequently, poems in the huang mode take women characters from history as their subject, whether because the helplessness of the most-often described women—Xi Shi, Wang Zhaojun, the Beauty Yu—excites pity, or because faded beauties exemplify mutability, or for other reasons involving the complex relations of authorship, political disappointment, and femininity in traditional China.
Statistics are, of course, hard to come by, since the poem on history is not an easily delimited category, but a glance through several major authors confirms a persistent mutual implication, thematic or affective, between the genre narrating a moment from history and the theme of the unfortunate palace beauty. Wang Wei's poem on the heroic silence of Lady Xi (who, forced to enter the harem of the king of Chu after her country's defeat, bore the king two sons but refused ever to speak to him) is followed by a series of three commemorating the loneliness of Ban Jieyu. Li Bai's poetic interests were far from those normally expressed in this genre, but when he did write a rare sīli poem on historical themes the story of Ban Jieyu or Wang Zhaojun was likely to engage his attention. Du Fu's five "Poems in Reminisence of Ancient Sites" include one on Wang Zhaojun. These three poets were by no means specialists in the liuyi mode, but for that very reason they may give exceptionally clear evidence of what they thought the mode required.

The "poems on history" genre thus offered a rich context of precedents and implications for the women poets ambitious enough to try it. (One might suppose that a genre so often devoted to the depiction of women would automatically interest women writers, but the choice of subject raises different questions of gender rivalry and decorum for every female poet.) Anthologies reveal a surprisingly long tradition of women writing in this mode. A few examples should help to locate Baqin among these female appropriators of the historical imagination.

Empress Yi De of the Liu (1040-76):
"Poem on History"

In the palace, only the two Zhaos count as wearers of cosmetic; Corrupt rains and cruel clouds have stolen the Han king's senses. Only the slender moon knows what is going on— It peeped as Feliyan entered the Zhaoyang palace.

(Zhao Feiyan, or Flying Swallow, was the concubine who replaced Ban Jieyu in the Han emperor Cheng's affections, later attaining the status of imperial consort. Her sister was also an imperial concubine. To say "the Han king" shows less respect than to say "emperor of the Han".)

Zhu jing'ai (fl. 1450): "The Concubine Yu"

His feats of strength exhausted, the double-puddled hegemons' might seeps away.

Women's Writing and the "Hong lou meng"

Your remorse at the sound of Chu songs fades and fades.
And your pure soul transforms itself into a grass of the plain,
Leat the East Wind sweep it to the suburbs of Han.
(The Beauty Yu was the concubine of Xiang Yu, hegemon of Chu and one of the rivals of Liu Bang for control of the Chinese world in the period of disorder following the First Emperor's death. Liu Bang's army surrounded Xiang Yu's at Gaixia, and at nightfall sang the songs of Chu in order to make Xiang and his men believe Chu had already fallen to Liu. The Beauty Yu addressed Xiang Yu in a song: "The soldiers of Han have invaded from the north, and from all four sides we hear the songs of Chu. Great king, you are at an end; how shall your unworthy concubine live from now on?" Her song over, she killed herself.)

Xu Yuan (fl. 1596):
"Reweaved Mourning for Lady Sun"
The oriole's cry breaks the traveler's heart. Look back to the Yong An Palace—the road indefinitely long, Strings and pipes of the Brocade City vanish like a dream, All one sees is the spring wind sweeping across green willows.

(In the time of disunion after the breakup of the Han dynasty, the general Zhou Yu of the state of Wu offered Liu Bei, the ruler of Shu, the younger sister of Sun Quan, the ruler of Wu, in marriage; Zhou planned to have Liu ambush when he visited Wu for the ceremonies. Zhou's scheme failed, and Lady Sun accompanied Liu to Shu. Later Sun Quan brought her back to Wu by trickery. Lady Sun finally drowned herself from shame at the way she had been used.)

Xu Cun (1622-77): "Six Poems on Historical Figures, Number 4"

When a scholar fails to realize his ambition He can achieve renown by traveling to far-off places. Ban Chao, in arms, went to the far west; Wang Zhaojun dwelt in the northern kingdoms. With a sigh she got up from the dais, A hundred thoughts compact in her mind. How, many years after, she lived in the palace, And her exceptional beauty was only now recognized! Now, the Lord of Men, sighing in distress, Immediately ordered the portraitist's death. With jade pendants hanging across her carved saddle,
With pearl studs sparkling on her horse’s golden bit,
She crossed a thousand, ten thousand, miles of yellow sand
And abruptly reached the felt tents.
Paintstakingly she drew mournful sounds from her
four-stringed lute.
Sounds that inspire sorrow in a thousand generations—
While those who in the Han palace had shone like clouds
Have faded away like fireflies in the grass.41

(Ban Chao, brother of the historians Ban Gu [male] and Ban Zhao [female], was unable to find civil employment suited to his talents and entered the army, serving for thirty years as general-in-chief of the Western frontier. On Wang Zhaojun’s story, see above, p. 258. Xu Can’s narration develops the Huai Han shu’s hint that dissatisfaction with her rank in the palace may have spurred Wang Zhaojun to go north. Line 10 refers to the later story that the palace ladies bribed the court painter Mao Yanzhou to make beautiful likenesses of them and thus gain them the emperor’s attention. Zhaojun refused to pay him a bribe, and the painter accordingly made her portrait ugly. When the emperor needed a “Chinese princess” to marry off to the ruler of the Huns, he chose Zhaojun as the most expendable woman in his palace, on the strength of the portrait. On discovering the beauty of the real Zhaojun, he had the painter killed.)

It is quite extraordinary in the history of the Wang Zhaojun theme to see her Hunnish exile figured as a career move parallel to Ban Chao’s entering the army. Baoqin’s poem, like most Zhaojun poems, follows the tragic version of the story, the one that makes her an unwilling exile—so unwilling indeed that, in a famous early yuwen poem on the subject, even Zhaojun’s horses join in the lamentation.42 With this last poem in this tiny selection of poems on historical figures by women, an important fact about their authors has crept into the depiction of their subjects. If yuwen poetry was reminiscent of the bouddor and the world of courtesans or (at the most) palace ladies, what of women who chose to write on history? The examples given above (taken from modern anthologies and unabridged by any claim to statistical representativity) show their authors as quick to take up the imaginative authority of men, perhaps because they benefited from a measure of independent social standing.43 Xu Can, the daughter and wife of high officials, experienced exile to the remote north alongside her husband, and it is probably reasonable to see an element of bravado, as well as of self-dramatization, in her depiction of Wang Zhaojun as no longer the pitiable victim of cruel policies but rather a willing exile with an abundant sense of her own merit. Similarly,
and Pauline Yu, who gave very generously of their time. Perry Link was replaced by Maureen Robertson on a second committee that oversaw the planning of the volume. None of these scholars should be blamed for the shape of its final version, however, which is the responsibility of the two editors.

In addition to those whose contributions are included in this volume, the conference benefited significantly from the other participants in the program. These included Chang Ching-erh, Pei-kai Cheng, Patricia Ebrey, Charlotte Furth, Valerie Hansen, Hsiung Ping-chen, Kang Zhengguo, Lin Mei-ying, Shuen-fu Lin, Susan Mann, Susan Naquin, Jonathan Spence, Su Zhecong, Catherine Swatek, Yenna Wu, Xu Shuofang, Ye Chunting, Yeh Chia-yung, Chun-fang Yu, Anthony Yu, Pauline Yu, and Yue Daiyun. Mention should also be made of the many others who sat in on our meetings, some coming from as far away as France, China, Japan, and New Zealand to join us. As expected, there was a strong and enthusiastic representation from New York and New England and vicinity, and from elsewhere in the United States and Canada. The liveliness of the conference derived in large measure from this wide and varied audience, which enhanced the exchange of views.

A selection of some papers presented in Chinese at the conference may be found in the Summer 1994 issue of jiaolu xuekan (Chinese culture quarterly; 6, no. 2), under the editorship of Pei-kai Cheng. The editors are most grateful for the sensitive and knowledgeable guidance of the editorial staff of Stanford University Press, John Ziener in particular.

E.W.
K.S.C.

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