

**Research article**

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# For the Love of Writing: Song Lyrics Featuring Literary Activities by Shen Cai (1752–?)

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**Abstract:** In traditional China, writing was essentially a male prerogative, and it was seen as a serious transgression of gender boundaries for women to write. This explains the absence of women’s literature in most of traditional Chinese literary history. Even during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), when women writers became an important part of the literary landscape, their writings remained a controversial issue. However, it is precisely because of the institutional, cultural and social obstacles that women writers faced as they navigated the male domain that women’s literary works are such a clear testament to the strength of their subjectivity.

This paper deals with the genre of the song lyric, which has had a long tradition of representing feminine beauty from an androcentric attitude, emphasizing qualities like fragility and passivity. The paper focuses on the song lyrics of Shen Cai (1752–?), many of which depict literary activities such as reading and writing. Given the special status of writing in traditional Chinese culture and the well-established literati female modality, this paper aims to investigate how Shen Cai viewed women’s engagement in writing, and how she remolded the conventional image of the lovelorn female persona into a cultured, erudite subject.

**Keywords:** Classical Chinese literature, women’s literature, the song lyric, gender, Shen Cai

## 1 Introduction: Writing as a Male Prerogative in Traditional China

The doctrine of separate spheres, with men controlling the outer/public sphere, and women being confined to inner/domestic spaces, constitutes a major pillar on which traditional Chinese gender ethics was founded (Ko 1994: 12). This idea of gender separation is supposed to be not only materialized with physical boundaries, but also to be extended to a division of labor in terms of social, economic and ritual responsibilities. Within this gender system, writing falls squarely within the outer and public domain as a male prerogative, and for women to engage in writing is considered a blatant transgression of the gender boundary.

Women in China have been writing since antiquity, but only as isolated and individual acts. The allocation of written language to the masculine, public sphere, the “informality of women’s literary education,” and the lack of “mechanisms for the preservation of women’s writings for most of the imperial period” (Robertson 1992: 64), together led to the absence of women from canonical Chinese literary history. This began to change after the late Ming period (seventeenth century) when women “came to constitute a significant and influential presence in the literary world” as text producers, readers, anthologists, editors, and literary critics (Egan 2013: 238).

First published in 1957, Hu Wenkai’s 胡文楷 (2008: 1206) seminal work *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 歷代婦女著作考 (Women’s Writings through the Ages) identifies a total of 4,027 women writers, 3,910 of whom were from the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911). As a time of contradictions, the Ming and Qing dynasties are often considered the most oppressive period for women. This is evidenced by the cult of chastity, foot-binding, an unprecedented number of books on women’s conduct, and other

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increasingly strict gender norms; however, this period also witnessed a flourishing of women's literature. There was a sudden proliferation of women's writings, as well as a sharp increase in the publication of their works, which amount to more than 3,000 titles (Chang 1997: 147). The rediscovery of this astounding repertory has brought about the realization that "no nation has produced more anthologies or collections of women's poetry than late imperial China" (Chang 1997: 147). This unprecedented phenomenon was a combined result of cultural, social and economic factors, such as the burgeoning publishing industry fueled by the monetary economy, the improved accessibility of domestic education for women, and the fluid Confucian gender ethics during the Ming and Qing.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the popularity and proliferation of women's writings in late imperial China, the literary activity of women, who were often seen as neglecting their moral and domestic responsibilities, remained a social taboo or at best a highly controversial issue. Since women were barred from the official examinations and denied access to public careers, "whenever a woman wrote, the purpose of writing – not simply the quality of it – was subject to scrutiny and evaluation, praise or blame" (Mann 1997: 17). The negative view of it has mainly two prongs, as Egan summarizes:

The first was the prevalent but not universal belief that women should not write even though they might be classically educated and well-read. The second was the feeling that a woman's writing, if it existed at all, should not be circulated because, if it were, it would fall into the hands of strangers, indeed male strangers. (2013: 15)

Egan argues that these two ways of thinking worked together to ensure that so little writing by women was preserved before the Ming and Qing dynasties (2013: 15). However, during this dynamic period of late imperial China, there were also many male literati who genuinely appreciated women's talent in literature and enthusiastically promoted their works through publication, a phenomenon that was uncommon in Western literary history (Chang 1998). According to Chang, it was in fact male literati who served as the editorial brains behind most women poets' anthologies (Chang 1994: 170). From their point of view, the female substance was composed of the "purest cosmic essences" 靈秀之氣 (*lingxiu zhi qi*), and their writings, unspoiled by politics and utilitarianism, were therefore naturally superior to those of men (Chang 1994: 171).

As a product of this time of contradictions, even women writers themselves held ambivalent attitudes toward their own engagement in writing and took conflicting stances on the publication of their work. Although some did venture to write poetry, many seem to have internalized the view that a woman's words should not go beyond the inner chamber and consequently never published anything. Some even chose to destroy their poems upon completion to avoid having them be read by strangers. Hence their writings featured the recurring literary trope of burning manuscripts. Of course, there were female writers who proudly strove to get their works published, such as Wanyan Yun Zhu 完顏惲珠 (1771–1833), who compiled the *Zhengshi ji* 正始集 (Correct Beginnings), a monumental anthology of women's poetry. Unlike many of her contemporary male literati, who either denigrated women's writing as a serious transgression and diversion from their true calling, or celebrated it as a manifestation of their emotional spontaneity and sensual beauty, Yun Zhu in particular regarded women's poetry with pride as a means of conveying their scholarly and moral authority, and women's erudition as both a hallmark and product of the High Qing period (Mann 1997: 97).

Since writing was culturally gendered as male, and women writers had no rightful place in this domain, they often needed to seek legitimacy and to justify their engagement in literature in the following ways:

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the reasons for the growing prevalence of women's writing, see Dorothy Ko, "In the Floating World: Women and Commercial Publishing," in *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (1994: 29–67).

Some sought to establish a female genealogy from within that tradition, invoking the names of a handful of famous women of talent in history – Han scholar and teacher Ban Zhao, Tang poet Xue Tao, Song poets Li Qingzhao and Zhu Shuzhen, and Yuan painter-calligrapher Guan Daosheng. Others sought to discover germs of women’s culture in the Confucian canon by arguing that many of the authors featured in the *Book of Songs* were female. Some women went further than seeking legitimacy; they actively embraced Confucian values and took it as a woman’s duty to resuscitate the Confucian way and to transmit it to the next generation. (Ko 1994: 18–19)

Whatever their justifications of, and attitudes toward, their involvement in literature, it is precisely because of all the institutional, cultural and social obstacles faced by women writers that their literary works are a clear testament to the strength of their subjectivity, and this enabled them to challenge the conventional gender norms.

## 2 A Male Construction: The Femininity of The Song Lyric

Although women’s writing was scarce and largely overlooked before the Ming and Qing, there is a large body of poems written in a female voice. Many of them were written anonymously, but most bore the signature of a male poet (Samei 2004: 1). This was particularly true with the genre of the song lyric,<sup>2</sup> where there has been a long tradition of representing feminine beauty as characterized by qualities like fragility and passivity for the purpose of male erotic gratification from an androcentric perspective.

The genre of the song lyric arose and thrived during the Song dynasty (960–1270) – a time of seemingly endless lavish banquets and different social events made possible by the material prosperity of the period. As a consequence, most song lyrics were written by male literati while attending banquets or parties, using assumed female personae that spoke of love or longing. The lyrics would then be given to female singers to perform for the banquet guests, among whom were usually the lyric writers themselves. This practice of gender-crossing in its composition and the way the song lyric was performed have unsurprisingly made gender and sexual relationships important issues in the genre (Yu 1994: xi).

Within this entrenched practice, the theme of love and the images of women were always staged and positioned in the women’s private inner quarters, i.e. the boudoir. Hence the term “boudoir poet-ics/topoi” was coined. As depicted by male literati, the female persona – whose physical beauty, voice and emotions functioned as objects of artistic description and appreciation – was always confined to a state of lovelorn sorrow, pining for her absent lover. As Chang aptly points out, women’s images, voices, emotions and spaces were the “monopolies” of male literati until women writers ventured into the domain of writing (Chang 1998: 86). Consider, for example, the following song lyric by Wei Zhuang 韋莊 (836–910):

### 酒泉子

月落星沈  
樓上美人春睡  
綠雲欹  
金枕膩  
畫屏深

### *To the tune, “On a Spring of Wine”*

Moon sets, stars sink;  
In the tower, a beauty’s in spring sleep.  
Dark cloud-locks askew,  
Golden pillow gleams  
Deep behind a painted screen.

<sup>2</sup> As a genre of traditional Chinese poetry, the song lyric is known for its fluid structure, which often consists of heterometric lines. It was one of the genres most often adopted by women writers, alongside *shi* poetry, the lines of which are isometric.

子規啼破相思夢	Cuckoo cries break an affectionate dream;
曙色東方纔動	Dawn color in the east just beginning to grow.
柳煙輕	Mist on willows is light,
花露重	Dew on blossoms heavy –
思難任	Thoughts hard to bear. <sup>3</sup> (Wei 1986: 557)

The first stanza presents an external view of the sleeping beauty and her boudoir setting. The detailed description of her disheveled hair and gleaming golden pillow hints at the presence of an anonymous voyeur, whose gaze can penetrate not only the material boundary of the painted screen, but also her inner sanctum. The female persona remains silent throughout the poem,<sup>4</sup> but her inner thoughts are nonetheless revealed by the trespassing male gaze. In the second stanza, the cry of a cuckoo interrupts her love-filled dream. Awoken to her loneliness, she finds the sorrow of separation hard to bear.

This poem demonstrates how the female persona is treated as a silent and passive object of appreciation alongside the boudoir setting, with her appearance, thoughts and emotions readily exploited for masculine interest and pleasure (Li 2024: 87). For most male poets, to quote Paul Rouzer, “there is no qualitative difference between exposing her bedroom, her body, and her mind” (1989: 19). Even when she does speak, both her voice and the emotions conveyed through it are still the objects of artistic appreciation. As Fong puts it, “the [male] gaze is inscribed in the constitution of the female, even as speaking subject” (Fong 1994: 107). This particular use of a female voice serves no other purpose than to multiply male pleasure through narcissism or voyeurism (Morgan 1994: 7). Moreover, with romantic love being the “sole and all-absorbing topic” (Shields 2006: 1) of literati song lyrics, little room is left for the female persona to speak of matters other than lovelornness or the grief of abandonment.

### 3 Negotiation and Women’s Writing as Minor Literature

Due to the aforementioned patriarchal proprietorship of writing in traditional Chinese culture, women writers neither had a rightful position in the literary domain nor a language of their own in which to write when they ventured into it. Instead, they had to employ the dominant language of the literati, “which was developed over many centuries to represent masculine consciousness, experiences, and expressive needs” (Robertson 2010: 383). Maureen Robertson, borrowing from Deleuze, defines traditional Chinese women’s writing as a minor literature (2010: 382–386), a literature that “a minority constructs within a major language” because of the impossibility of writing otherwise (Deleuze and Guattari 2018: 1371). But as Robertson observes, women’s literature, albeit written in the dominant language, is often “formed differently due to a necessity that springs from some difference in position” (2010: 382), and this is where the concept of negotiation comes into play.

Negotiation as a theory was initially developed by Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci to explain the power dynamics between dominant and subordinated social groups (1971). It is a contestatory process in which the subordinated party effects its own local logics of power without subverting the existing system established by the dominant party. The concept was first introduced into the study of traditional Chinese women’s literature by Robertson (1992: 63–110) and was later widely adopted by scholars in the field. In Robertson’s definition, women writers who negotiated, acknowledged and

3 Translation by Samei Bell Maija (2004: 124).

4 In Samei’s reading, the female persona herself expresses the perceptions and feelings in the second stanza, because the modal *cai* (only now) in line 7 and the phrase *nanren* (hard to bear) in line 10 suggest a speaker (2004:124–125). However, I am inclined to read the poem in the conventional way, where both the appearance and the inner thoughts of the female persona are observed and told by an anonymous voyeur. This is because in line 2 the writer uses the term *meiren* (beauty) to refer to the female persona, which strongly suggests a third-person perspective.

wrote largely in the literary convention established by male writers, but they also adjusted it to fulfill their own expressive needs. The act of negotiation was therefore considered a sign of the strong subjectivity and initiative that enabled women to deviate from the dominant literati convention and to articulate their own viewpoints.

Due to its intrinsic association with women and femininity, the song lyric has been particularly relevant in academia that explore gender-specific issues such as subjectivity, agency, and self-representation. Because of the male-constructed female modality deeply embedded in the tradition of the genre, negotiation has become a frequently used analytical tool in studies. Scholars such as Grace Fong and Xiaorong Li have provided incisive analyses of the song lyrics written by women writers, who are considered to have engaged in negotiation by rejecting either literati femininity or traditional womanhood. These women writers ventured to adopt an allusive language and a masculine voice and broached traditionally male-gendered topics, such as patriotism and historical contemplation (Fong 1994: 107–144; Li 2012: 113).

Considering the special status of writing as a male prerogative, this paper investigates women's song lyrics that depict literary activities such as reading and writing. Negotiation remains an applicable tool for the study, because both gender norms and the literati conventions were challenged, but not necessarily rejected as a whole. Drawing on this concept, this paper aims to explore how women writers responded to the conventional portrayal of women and how they challenged the traditional qualities assigned to women by engaging in writing about writing.

#### 4 The Boudoir as a Study: Shen Cai's Song Lyrics Featuring Literary Activities

To set a reasonable scope, this paper focuses solely on the writer Shen Cai 沈彩 (1752–?), whose individual collection *Chunyulou gao* 春雨樓臺 (The Collection of the Spring Rain Pavilion) in the Ming Qing Women's Writings database<sup>5</sup> contains a total of 64 song lyrics. More than a third of her repertoire features literary activities such as reading, writing, and painting. In her own description, the setting of her boudoir also resembled that of a literati studio, filled with calligraphy and paintings from the Jin, Tang and Song dynasties (Shen 1924: 詞上. 4b-5a).

Shen Cai, whose courtesy name was Hongping, was a native of Pinghu in Zhejiang province. Probably as a result of the declining wealth and status of her natal family, Shen Cai was married off at the age of 13 *sui*<sup>6</sup> as a concubine to Lu Xuan 陸烜, a member of the wealthy Lu lineage in Pinghu county (Shen 1782: Preface 3a). After the marriage, she was adored not only by Lu Xuan, but also by his principal wife Peng Zhenyin 彭貞隱 for her good manners and intelligence. Being a poet herself, Peng Zhenyin took Shen Cai under her tutelage, and the two developed an intimate bond, similar to that between a mother and daughter (Fong 2017: 72). According to the Pinghu local gazetteer, after failing the district examination, Lu Xuan gave up his pursuit of an official career and instead became a keen traveler and avid bibliophile (Shen 1924: 附錄. 1a-1b). With access to the family library and under the tutelage of Peng Zhenyin, it is perhaps not surprising that Shen Cai grew into a cultivated lady, well-versed in both literature and painting. Her poetry collection also shows that she was quite gifted in music, as it contains song lyrics written to her self-composed tunes.

For Shen Cai, the genre of the song lyric served not only as a pastime or display of artifice, but also as a medium of self-writing and representation. The autobiographical nature of many of her

5 See Grace Fong, ed. *Ming Qing Women's Writings* 明清婦女著作. January 16, 2024, <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/english/index.php>

6 In Chinese reckoning, age was calculated by taking the lunar year of one's birth as year one and adding a year at each lunar New Year's Day. Therefore, a Chinese child is about one year older in *sui* than if his or her age were counted according to the Western convention.

song lyrics is indicated either by detailed subtitles that specify the purpose of writing or by the direct inclusion of her family members in the content. See, for example, the following song lyric:

<p>減字木蘭花 春日</p> <p>洗粧初罷 閒坐海棠紅影下 且展瑤函 蘭吹啣唔讀二南</p> <p>無端觸緒 楊柳如帷鶯對語 欲寫春詞 謔浪深防大婦知</p>	<p><i>To the tune, "Magnolia Flowers, Short Version"</i> <i>Spring Day</i></p> <p>Having just finished my makeup, Leisurely I sit beneath the red crabapple flowers. I open the book framed in jade, I hum as I read the Odes with an orchid breath.<sup>7</sup></p> <p>For some reason my mood is stirred, Embraced by the drape-like willows, I chat with the orioles. I wish to write some racy lyrics, Being naughty, I will keep them from the main wife.<sup>8</sup> (Shen 1924: 詞下. 3a)</p>
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The first stanza presents a pleasing scene inside her boudoir, where she is reading the odes from the *Book of Songs* 詩經 (*Shijing*) beneath red crabapple flowers. Notably, she is reading none other than the sections of the Odes of the South Under the Duke of Zhou 周南 (*Zhou Nan*) and the Odes of the South Under the Duke of Shao 召南 (*Shao Nan*), which feature many ardent and heartfelt folk songs about love and romance. In the first line of the second stanza, although she claims that her mood is stirred for no reason, it is very likely that she is stirred by the love poems she just read. Consequently, she is motivated to write some "racy lyrics" (*chun ci*, lit. spring lyric) in line 7. As the bold use of the term "racy lyrics" indicates, she is playing with the boudoir-erotic style, but only to particularize and transform it by turning the passively eroticized female persona into an actively desiring subject. In a further twist, she introduces an unusual third party, the principal wife Peng Zhenyin, into the scenario. This addition of autobiographical elements also indicates that, instead of adopting a persona, Shen Cai fully embraced her true mischievous nature and was fearless in admitting her interest in writing suggestive lyrics.

Shen Cai's mischievous nature is also displayed in the next song lyric, whose autobiographical character is revealed by the inclusion of her husband:

<p>醉花陰 春日即景</p> <p>十二珠簾剛半揭 苦雨吹如藥 已過試燈時 吟到梅花 冥索枯腸竭</p> <p>翠匣玉洗文窗列 宣紙平鋪雪 擬作擘窠書 欲卸春衫 敢倩檀郎疊</p>	<p><i>To the tune, "Drunk in the Shade of Flowers"</i> <i>On the Scenery of A Spring Day</i></p> <p>The beaded curtains were just now half-lifted, Bitter rain blown like leaves. It's past the time of lighting, Now to make verses on plum blossoms, I scour my mind to no avail.</p> <p>Ink bowls of jade stand before the carved window, Xuan paper spread out, white as snow. As I turn to strict calligraphy, I wish to take off my spring robe, Could you fold it for me, my lover? (Shen 1924: 詞上. 6b-7a)</p>
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7 This poem was translated by me, taking inspiration from Grace Fong's translation (2017: 81). In this line, the author was reading odes from the Book of Songs 詩經 (*Shijing*), the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry. In particular, she was reading odes from the sections 二南 (*Er Nan*), namely, the Odes of the South Under the Duke of Zhou 周南 (*Zhou Nan*) and the Odes of the South Under the Duke of Shao 召南 (*Shao Nan*), which include many love songs. But in order to keep the translation concise and reasonably understandable, I adopt Fong's way of translating the original term "*Er Nan*" simply as "Odes."

8 All the translations of Shen Cai's poems in this paper are my own unless otherwise indicated.

As indicated by the subtitle, this song lyric was written on a spring day – a time of year when sentiments arise easily, according to classical Chinese poetics. The incessant bitter rain in line 2 also leads us to anticipate the motif of spring sorrow. However, as is revealed in the second strophe, instead of going along with the convention of mourning the passage of time or the inevitability of human aging, Shen Cai writes a poem about the plum blossoms in her boudoir. The final line of the first stanza even moves on to highlight the difficulty and intricacy of writing, reflecting the poet's intellectual nature and dedication to poetry. Probably due to her temporary loss of inspiration (line 5), she turns to practicing calligraphy in the second stanza. Unlike the traditional female persona in literati song lyrics, she is not alone, but in the company of her husband (lines 9–10). In a playful tone, she asks him to remove and fold her spring robe, so that she can work unhindered on her calligraphy. Though not without a hint of suggestiveness, her request shows enough initiative to put her husband in a supportive role in her own literary activity, something rarely seen in the handling of male literati.

In my own reading experience, what makes Shen Cai stand out from other women poets is the lively and joyful tone that pervades her entire collection. As Fong also points out in *Herself an Author*, “in Shen Cai’s poetry, there is a total absence of tears or melancholy; nor is there any sense of boredom or ennui. She textualizes the boudoir environment into an energized, productive space” (Fong 2017: 81). As a skilled and cultured poet, Shen Cai was reasonably well-versed in the literati tradition, in which the female persona was invariably confined to the state of sorrow, and she deliberately wrote against it in many of her song lyrics:

生查子  
夜坐

翠墨幾研雲  
認蠟常消淚  
覓句到天明  
不是愁無寐

更點鳳團茶  
重熬龍涎氣  
清極自生愁  
略似愁滋味

*To the tune, “On New Hawthorns”*  
*Sitting at Night*

The dark ink ground evenly,  
The crimson candle weeps as it burns down.  
To compose a line, I ponder till dawn breaks.  
It is not sorrow that keeps me awake.

Once again I whisk the phoenix tea cake,  
Relight the incense of ambergris.  
Utmost serenity is said to beget sorrow,  
Perhaps there is a slight taste. (Shen 1924: 詞上. 6a)

The “weeping candle” on line 2 is a frequently used image. Its burning down often suggests a sleepless night and represents the inner state of the female persona. But in the hands of Shen Cai, the weeping candle serves to bear witness to her poetic endeavors. As she clearly states in the last strophe of the first stanza, it is not sorrow that keeps her awake all night, but her sheer persistence in coming up with a satisfactory line. Unlike in the previous two poems, where she was in the company of family members, here she is alone in her boudoir, well-occupied with cultured activities such as whisking tea cakes and burning incense (lines 5–6), in which she finds serenity (line 7). Interestingly, the last two lines appear to contradict the overall untroubled tone of the song lyric in that sorrow seems to creep in amidst the serenity. However, the use of the characters 略 (slightly) and 似 (as if, or seems like) in the last line hints at her true, carefree inner state. Given her consistent depiction of her boudoir life through a lighthearted lens, the seeming twist at the end could be construed as sarcasm directed toward the cliched sorrowful sentiment in song lyrics.

憶王孫  
作字

偶濡象管試臨池  
法帖鵝群擬獻之

*To the tune, “Thinking of the Prince”*  
*Practicing Calligraphy*

I wet the ivory brush for calligraphy,  
To copy the script of Wang Xianzhi.

仔細端詳下筆遲	Studying closely, I hesitate to land the first stroke.
似相思	Seemingly lovelorn –
手托香腮不語時	Chin on hands, lost for words. (Shen 1924: 詞上. 4a)

As the subtitle indicates, the central topic of this song lyric is practicing calligraphy. As an admirer of Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy,<sup>9</sup> she studies his script closely before making a single stroke. Of particular interest is the last strophe, where she compares her gesture of contemplation to that of lovelornness. Although she provides no further explanation, it would seem reasonable to read a hint of sarcasm into this comparison, considering how women's thoughts were always reduced to lovelornness in the eyes of male literati.

This last example is a bold and valorous piece in two senses: first, she proudly proclaims her capability and erudition at a time when humility was considered an important female virtue; and secondly, in addition to her frankness about her engagement in literature, she even broaches the subject of how reading and writing have empowered her.

弄月吟風	<i>To the tune, "Appreciating The Moon and Celebrating The Wind"</i>
自度曲題春雨樓壁	<i>Inscribing on The Wall of Spring Rain Pavilion Using a Self-Composed Tune</i>

乍見繁花堆繡	Just now I saw burgeoning flowers piled up like embroidery,
轉眼落葉飄紅	In the blink of an eye, leaves fall and flowers drift.
也莫管	I care not!
春來春去	Spring comes and goes,
弄月與吟風	I will appreciate the moon and celebrate the wind.

閱盡萬里山色	I've seen ten thousand miles of scenery,
開拓萬古心胸	My mind encompasses all antiquity.
那知道	Who would know?
金釵玉佩	With golden hairpin and jade pendant,
身在小樓中	I am but one in the boudoir. (Shen 1924: 詞下. 1a)

As can be gathered from the subtitle, this song lyric was written to a tune she composed herself and was inscribed on the wall of her residence as a self-declaration. Her distinctive and consistent style can be perceived right from the beginning, where she clearly states that she will enjoy her life to the fullest and indulge in literary creation regardless of the lapse of time. In the second stanza, she confidently proclaims her erudition and worldliness, even though she was ostensibly just a woman physically confined to the boudoir. This can have two slightly different but also perfectly compatible interpretations, depending on where the emphasis lies – on gender or seclusion. In the first case, one could understand the lines as her claim that she possessed not only great knowledge but also a certain depth of mind. In the second case, she might be arguing that her physical seclusion cannot limit the freedom of her mind. I am personally inclined to accept the second interpretation, in light of her travel essay which, according to Fong, is the only extant record of her experience of traveling outside the house. The essay describes an evening excursion to a nearby river aboard her husband's newly built studio boat. In it, she fondly records all the sights, sensations and delights she shared with her husband on their cruise together. At the end, she reflects on the meaning of travel:

I reflect on the fact that my feet walk over six square feet of ground; I have never traveled. Now my traveling stops here, but it has more than satisfied my simple inspiration. I think that if one could not get simple inspiration, though one might travel all over the world, one has not really begun to travel. Thus I record this.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> She mentions her emulation of Wang Xianzhi's script in several of her song lyrics.

<sup>10</sup> Translation by Grace Fong (2017: 71).

顧余足履六尺地，從未嘗遊。遊止此，然而已飢清興。苟不得清興，雖足跡遍天下，以為未始遊可也。遂記之。(Shen 1782: 10.7b)

As her reflection shows, she had never traveled before, and the space of the boudoir constituted the extent of her ordinary mode of existence. Nonetheless, she calmly accepted the spatial limitation of her life and, as she concludes, it was her mobility of mind and spirit that mattered most. It was through reading and writing that her mind and vision transcended her confinement to a limited space. Perhaps it does not matter which reading is more correct, since her confidence when acknowledging her erudition is so readily apparent, and the act of inscribing the poem on the wall of her bed-chamber puts her self-affirmation beyond doubt.

## 5 Conclusion

Given the special status of writing in traditional China, Shen Cai achieved in her song lyrics featuring literary activities what could be called a “double transgression” in two senses: first, she crossed the gender boundary twice by writing about writing; second, what she transgressed is not just the traditional gender norm but also the well-worn image of passive and lovelorn women.

What I find particularly relevant about Shen Cai’s song lyrics is how she approached the topic of writing without resorting to a masculine persona or voice. Instead, she naturally integrated various literary activities into her ordinary life in the boudoir as a woman, and in doing so she enriched the connotation of femininity. Her stance on womanhood and femininity, which she proudly embraced and celebrated in many of her works, was ever steadfast. To quote her on the subject:

Poetry is what speaks one’s nature and feeling (*xingqing*), and nature and feeling accord with the position that one occupies. If one is a person of silk and perfume, but wishes to take off the habits of silk and perfume, then one’s words would not be in accord with one’s nature and feeling. If one is not in accord with one’s nature and feeling, how can one write poetry?<sup>11</sup>

夫詩者，道性情也，性情者，依乎所居之位也。身既為綺羅香澤之人，乃欲脫綺羅香澤之習，是其辭皆不根乎性情，不根乎性情，又安能以作詩哉！(Shen 1782: 10.4b-5a)

This statement was in response to a critique of Shen Cai’s poems made by her friend and fellow poet Wang Liang 汪亮. As one who championed the unsentimental style, Wang Liang disapproved of Shen Cai’s highly feminine style of writing, commenting that “if you can quit writing about silk and perfume (i.e. femininity), your poems would reach another level” (Shen 1782: 10.4b-5a). Later in the same statement, Shen Cai also pointed out that Wang Liang’s comment was very much in accord with the male literati standard that praised women’s works for having no “air of the boudoir” 閨閣之氣 or “air of rouge and powder” 脂粉氣 (Shen 1782: 10.6a-6b).

Shen Cai’s firm stance in her reply serves as a clear reminder that, in a context where feminine qualities are considered both morally and aesthetically inferior, it takes great strength to maintain, embrace and articulate femininity. Through her engagement in various cultural activities, she redefined femininity, attributing to it qualities not traditionally associated with women, such as erudition, intellectuality and even boldness. Her works also demonstrate how literary activities enabled women writers to break through their physical seclusion and achieve freedom of mind.

<sup>11</sup> Translation by Grace Fong (2017: 124).

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