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# Transgression of Female Space and the Construction of Subjectivity in Tanci Fiction Anthologies from the Late Qing to the Early Republican Period

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**Abstract.** Tanci fiction, noted as a genre of narrative verse from the late Qing dynasty to the early Republican period offers a unique textual site for exploring the transformation of the "female space" in literature, tracing a trajectory from domestic fantasy to the enactment of female agency. This article examines *Liuhua Meng* (1841), *Bisheng Hua* (1857), *Zixu Ji* (1883), *Jingwei Shi* (1907), and *Yujing Tai* to analyze the literary representation of women transgressing their prescribed spatial boundaries. The progression spans from the "appropriative" occupation of male public spaces—often through the trope of cross-dressing—to a defiant withdrawal from the gender order (achieved through death or the refusal to resume female attire), and finally to the "elopement" or departure of women in late Qing and early Republican fiction, where spatial transgression shifts from mere narrative artifice to a form of real-world political mobilization. This study reveals that the transgression of spatial boundaries in *tanci* fiction is not simply a matter of "stepping out of the boudoir"; rather, it represents the evolution of female subjectivity—a transition from seeking glory within a male-defined framework to asserting one's own autonomous will. This process is shaped by the tension between the traditional "happy ending" convention inherent in *tanci* verse and the evolving expectations of its readership; it also reflects how early feminist discourse in the late Qing period permeated and transformed the literary genre traditionally associated with the domestic sphere.

**Keywords**: Tanci fiction; female space; transgression; subjectivity; late Qing and early Republican period

## 1. Introduction

Tanci fiction was one of the most concentrated literary genres for female writing[1]-[8] during the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, the spatial writing within it often encountered a paradox. That is, if women wanted to enter the public domain, in terms of narrative logic, they seemed to have to first "not be women". Therefore, disguising as men became the most symptomatic scene in Tanci fiction. However, in different eras, different tan ci works handled this scene in completely opposite ways. Some allowed the female protagonist to happily remove her male attire and change into female clothing, returning to her sisters; others made them use death to refuse to re-dress, turning gender identity into an "unyielding position"; even in the late Qing dynasty, there were cases where crossing boundaries was pushed from the paper into reality.

The five works selected in this article cover the time period from 1841 to 1920, which is a crucial moment of change. It should be noted that "Jingwei Stone" (Qiu Jin, 1907) has only five episodes (or six incomplete chapters) and is not a widely accepted "selected work" but it is the most radical one among the space-crossing scenes in late Qing female tan ci，and also the most self-reflexive. Therefore， it still

has certain reference value. "Yuming Tai" (Jiang Yingqing， 1924) and the title "Hero and Criminal" are not found in the existing bibliographies， but Jiang Yingqing's another tan ci "Fengli Zhenren" has the plot of "a female protagonist pursuing her true love influenced by Western learning". This article limits the discussion time period to "late Qing - early 20th century"， focusing on the early 20th-century turn of the works by Qiu Jin and Jiang Yingqing. For the title "Hero and Criminal"， it is understood based on Jiang Yingqing's tan ci creation ideas.

## 2. Representative Subject in the Male Space

"Flower Dream" (Li Guiyu, 1841) and "Pen Bore Flower" (Qiu Xinru, 1857) are both excellent examples of female characters crossing boundaries in the Tanci fiction. The heroines in these two works all dressed like men to enter the imperial examinations, the court, and the battlefield, reaching a point where even the male colleagues had to respect them. "Gui Hengkui 'lived in the exquisite pavilion' and 'rose to a noble family', dressed as a woman, raised an army to govern the world, and was made a king in southern Chu; Jiang Dehua was rescued by drowning and then pretended to be a scholar to take the exam, achieved success and built a career, and finally married her cousin Wen Shaoya." On the surface, it seems that both of them have completely broken the boundaries of the sisters.

However， the authenticity of this kind of boundary-crossing "subjectivity" also needs to be carefully examined. Gui Hengkui's power and glory seemed to have shifted to her husband Huan Binyu after she disguised herself and married into the Huan family， but in fact， the power was still in her own hands. Jiang Dehua's destination is more representative. She disguised herself as a married woman and gave the position to her husband， "Jiang Junbi" became "Jiang Dehua". Some scholars believe that one of the reasons for Qiu Xinru to write "Pen Bore Flower" was dissatisfaction with the decision of Meng Lijun in "Rebirth Story" who "insulted her father and defied the law"， so she wanted to make up for it by having Jiang Dehua return to a "fully loyal and filial" state. This also indicates that the boundary-crossing of space in "Pen Bore Flower" always exists in the narrative logic with a "temporary borrowing"， that is， women entering male space is to complete a certain task (saving the father， defending the country， maintaining chastity)， and when the task is completed， they need to return the right to use the space.

The agents of this stage's boundary-crossing can be called "proxy subjects". They can act in male space because of the symbolic disguise of male clothing. The reason why their authority can be recognized is still because of the moral addition brought by "actually being a woman" (chaste， filial)， not by the boundary-crossing behavior itself. The radicalism of space boundary-crossing is counteracted by the literary tradition and readers' expectations ， becoming an acceptable "spectacle".

## 3. Space Without Cooperation at The Cost of Life

The emergence of *Zixu Ji* (by Wang Oushang, 1883) signifies a structural rupture in the spatial transgression of Tanci fiction. Zhao Xiangxian (Pei Yun)’s ending is unparalleled in the history of narrative ballads. When her identity was exposed, she refused to wear women’s clothing or marry her fiancé Zhang Duan, even resorting to a three-day fast to end her life. Before her death, she also forced the emperor to issue an imperial decree dissolving the engagement. Wang Oushang’s granddaughter later recalled the author’s intent: "She found such an outcome unimaginable and undesirable, unwilling to accept this reality. She sought to write a novel about a woman who rebels utterly."

What is the significance of Zhao Xiangxian's spatial transgression? When Gui Hengkui and Jiang Dehua transgressed, it was "entering and then returning," but Zhao Xiangxian was "entering and not wanting to leave." She refused to accept the "re-vestition" ritual of spatial return, knowing that accepting it would imply acknowledging her usurpation of a prime minister's position, her political talent, and social

status in a male-dominated space—all of which were illegitimate, invalid, and required restitution. By rejecting re-vestition, she chose to deny the legitimacy of gendered spatial order with her life.

The general meaning behind this stance is: the fundamental dilemma of transgressive writing in Tanci fiction. The "subjectivity" women gain by wearing male attire is merely borrowed "subjectivity." When the symbolic support of clothing disappears, society will revoke their "subjectivity." Zhao Xiangxian chose death over accepting cancellation. Her death is not a failure but the most extreme form of spatial resistance—if this spatial order denies her the right to occupy a position earned through talent as a woman, she is unwilling to live under such an order.

## 4. Spatial Overreach Politics in the late Qing Dynasty

Qiu Jin's "Jinwei Stone" (1907) raised the boundary of Tanci fiction's space to a new level. The story of Huang Juru (Qiu Jin) was not "female impersonation for achieving success - changing back / refusing to change"), but "run away - going to study abroad - participating in the revolution". In the preface of "Jinwei Stone", Qiu Jin directly stated her creative purpose: "I then composed it in pop ballad form and wrote it in vernacular language, layer by layer revealing various evil habits and painful humiliations of women in society. I want the readers to see it, be shocked, feel relieved and inspired, and strive to ascend from the dark room to the light."

The boundary of space in this case is fundamentally different. In the first three works, the boundary of "space" was virtual; the court, the examination hall, and the battlefield were all places where men held power, and girls could only enter through men's clothing. The boundary did not truly touch the real-world institutions. In "Jinwei Stone", the boundary was geographical and physical, irreversible. Huang Juru left home, crossed the sea to Japan, and joined the revolutionary organization. Each step was something a girl could do in reality, but it was very difficult. And Qiu Jin herself also went to study in Japan in 1904 and died in Xuan Ting Kou in Shaoxing in 1907. Her life was the unfinished part of "Jinwei Stone".

The key to this transformation is that the boundary of space in Tanci fiction changed from "substitute performance" - the heroine replaced the author in the fiction to complete the boundary crossing, to "model invocation" - the author summoned readers to imitate through their own boundary-crossing behavior. Huang Juru was no longer just Qiu Jin's male costume substitute, but Qiu Jin's past and future. The destination of the boundary crossing was no longer the negation of "being exposed of identity" but the affirmation of "being remembered by history".

## 5. The Aftermath and Challenges of the Early Republic Period

Jiang Yingqing's creation of pipa music was during a period when the revolutionary enthusiasm in the late Qing Dynasty had waned and the New Culture Movement of the May Fourth era was on the rise. His work "Yuming Tai" (1924) depicted the story of the protagonist Cai Xia, who was forced to marry her enemy's husband due to her family being falsely accused. On the wedding night, she stabbed her husband with a needle and then hid in the closet to change clothes. "Fengliang Zuren" (1926) told the story of a girl named Xia Tianhua who had received a Western education and wanted to find true love but failed to do so. Eventually, she chose to never marry again for the rest of her life. Compared to the "revolutionary escape" style of Qiu Jin, the female characters depicted by Jiang Yingqing took on more of a "choice in a difficult situation" - the act of assassination and changing clothes were acts of resistance out of desperation, while never getting married for life was a negative response to a marriage relationship that made her uncomfortable, and was not an attempt to establish another social space.

This is probably the true situation of the writing of Tanci fiction space in the early Republic of China. The "escape - study abroad - revolution" path given by the late Qing Dynasty remained an unrepeatable exception for most young ladies. Although the

society of the early Republic of China opened up some new career spaces for women, such as Jiang Yingqing herself having taught at a girls' school, the Tanci fiction relied on the female readers in the courtyards and their aesthetic expectations would still restrict overly drastic space-crossing writing. Jiang Yingqing's contribution was to transform the extraordinary women who crossed spaces into the predicaments of ordinary women, allowing readers to see that the world after crossing spaces did not automatically provide a place for their subjectivity.

## 6. Conclusion

From "The Dream of Lotus Flowers" to Jiang Yingqing, the writing of female space-crossing in Tanci fiction follows a clear yet tortuous path - using men's space to showcase one's talents (Gui Hengkui, Jiang Dehua) → unwilling to give up the space to preserve one's rights (Zhao Xiangxian) → replacing the fictional crossing with practical actions (Qiu Jin / Huang Jurui) → the troubles encountered after the crossing and the ordinary days (Jiang Yingqing). The forward momentum of this path is both the continuous confrontation of the ballad form with the "re-enactment of a grand conclusion" tradition, and the fundamental reshaping of women's status in the historical context as the feudal order gave way to modern nation-states.

Tanci fiction is a long narrative form that mainly uses rhymed prose and has the female quarters as its main circulation space. The imagination of space-crossing in Tanci fiction always has structural contradictions: it needs to satisfy the desire of female readers to "step out of the quarters", while also maintaining its own circulation in a society that does not allow women to truly go out. The death of Zhao Xiangxian and the death of Qiu Jin, one fictional and the other real, have pushed this contradiction to an irreconcilable point. It is precisely in this irreconcilable situation that the female subjectivity truly emerges. This subjectivity is not bestowed, nor borrowed, but is fought for with one's own life or one's own actions.

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