



Narrative, Genre, and Contextuality

The *Nüshu*-Transcribed Liang-Zhu Ballad in Rural South China

In this article I analyze a *changben* (song book) ballad of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai transliterated into *nüshu* (“female writing”), a script circulated exclusively among peasant women in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China. Conceptualizing genre as the intertextualization of an event, narrative poetics, and social context, I will discuss how the male-composed Liang-Zhu narrative ballad was read and received by *nüshu* women in rural Jiangyong, and through this process trace out the expressive niches of the *changben* genre. I will show that despite its transcription into *nüshu*, the Liang-Zhu *changben* narrative did not merely mirror Jiangyong women’s life worlds. Instead, it reflected and in the meantime refracted their inner feelings and social reality. Reflection and refraction intersect to create an expressive arena where audiences articulate their intricate sensibilities of conforming to the existing social order while simultaneously transforming it, and where they can project unrealistic but fulfilling fantasies of existence. Through *changben*, they contemplate being in-the-world, probing beneath the surface of existence, and searching for hope in everyday life.

KEYWORDS: genre—gender—narrative ballad—female literature (*nüshu*)—China

NARRATIVE ballads known as *changben* 唱本 (song book), which combine literary prose and oral verse, constituted perhaps the most popular genre across social classes in historical China. Starting in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), *changben* were read by newly literate commoners and listened to by illiterates, thus serving as a meeting ground for intellectual and folk culture (BROKAW 2007; MCLAREN 1998). Despite its pervasiveness, *changben* is the least explored genre among Chinese prosimetrical literatures (IDEMA 1999), with research largely confined to content analyses involving the historicity of narrated stories and their textual transformations over time. In an attempt to broaden the conceptual horizon of *changben*, I will investigate dialogic interactions between the texts and the contexts in which they were received and performed, thereby illuminating this genre’s expressive niches. I will use the ballad of Liang Shanbo 梁山伯 and Zhu Yingtai 祝英台 (hereafter “Liang-Zhu”), and specifically the Liang-Zhu *changben* that was transliterated into a script known as *nüshu* 女書, literally “female writing.”

Nüshu refers to both a script and the literature written in it. These works circulated among women in Jiangyong 江永 County in Hunan 湖南 Province from at least the late imperial era, though they were unknown in the outside world until 1982. For centuries, Jiangyong women had used *nüshu* to write about their life experiences and to lament their *kelian* 可憐 (misery) (LIU 2001, 2004a). Furthermore, these women—who were mostly illiterate in official Chinese *hanzi* 漢字 characters—also transcribed male-authored *changben* into *nüshu* so that they might enjoy the stories at their own convenience. In addition to indicating Jiangyong women’s interest in *hanzi* narratives, the transcriptions also suggest how male-composed *changben* captured or failed to capture the sense and sensibilities of peasant women—in other words, how male literary creations were received by women living in a rural community.

The Liang-Zhu ballad is one of the ten or so *changben* that have been transliterated into Jiangyong *nüshu* (GONG 1991; IDEMA 2009; XIE 1991; ZHAO, ed., 1992; ZHAO 2005). The story concerns a young girl named Zhu Yingtai, who disguises herself as a young man to study in an academy. In the course of her three years there, she befriends a classmate named Liang Shanbo, who does not discover Yingtai’s gender until he visits her after she has returned home. Shanbo dies soon after

this visit, and Yingtai prays to him as her wedding procession passes by his tomb. The tomb cracks open, and Yingtai is mysteriously drawn inside and disappears.

The mysterious disappearance of a woman in a man's tomb raises questions about whether the entombing represents the dead man's spiritual power to consummate a union, a woman's determination to follow a man even to the underworld, or a supernatural intervention into an "unusual" cross-gender relationship. Yingtai's dressing as a male and her resolve to study in an androcentric Confucian academy also raises many issues. How did she persuade her family to let her do that, and how was she able to conceal her gender from her male classmates? What was the nature of the Liang-Zhu relationship—friendship or romance? If romance was involved, their being buried together outside marriage clearly violated Confucian ideology; how should this violation be narrated, read, or translated?

The story has elements of mystery, whimsy, romance, and adventure plus hints of resistance and social transformation, and is therefore open to elaborate and divergent narrations. Across Chinese history, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai have been treated as real people, their story recorded in official gazetteers; their rendezvous has also been the focus of many novels, plays, song-dramas, chantefables, and prosimetrical narratives, including *changben* (LU 1985; QIAN 1956). As a narrative, whether historical or fictional, the Liang-Zhu story is never told as a pure incident lacking a point of view (OCHS and CAHILL 1996). Points of view are by no means pure reflections of an author/narrator's intentions, but are also informed by genre—a literary frame that orients interpretations, contains a set of expectations (HANKS 1987), and is subject to contextually constructed readings by audiences (BARTHES 1977; DURANTI 1986).

Based on fieldwork conducted since 1992, my research shows that the Liang-Zhu *changben* that had been transcribed in *nüshu* did not necessarily mirror Jiangyong women's social context; instead, it reflected as much as it refracted their lived experiences. This intersection of reflection and refraction gives structure to the expressive space of *changben*, wherein audiences may articulate their sensibilities about conforming to the existing social order while challenging it; there they may also project perhaps unrealistic but cherished aspirations and find insights into their daily lives. All of these represent the expressive niches of the *changben* genre, and explain why *changben* were so widely appreciated and especially beloved by peasant women in rural China. They also remind us that genre functions not only as a static framework for classification, but also as a field for interaction between text and context, as well as between literary construction and social dynamics.

RESEARCH SCOPE

The Liang-Zhu story has attracted research attention since the early twentieth century when, in the face of imperialist invasion, Chinese scholars tried to establish a new modern cultural identity through folk literature. The first collection of research on Liang-Zhu was published in 1930 by the *Minsu zhoukan* 民俗週刊 (Folklore weekly). In addition to documenting regionally diverse versions,

this special issue featured discussion of the historical origins and evolution of the narrative. Some scholars believe that the Liang-Zhu event occurred during the Eastern Jin 晉 (317–420), a period in which Chinese women were relatively free to participate in social activities (QIAN 1930). This would explain why Yingtai received parental permission to engage in cross-dressing so she could leave home and study among men. Others explore the connections between the Liang-Zhu story and other legends, the most frequently mentioned being the *Huashan Ji* 華山畿, a story about a man who requests that, upon his death, his funeral procession go past the house of his beloved (GU 1930). As soon as the mortuary cart reaches her door, it stops on its own and cannot be moved. The object of his love comes out of the house and says, “Now that you have died from love-longing for me, how can I go on living? If you pity me, please open the coffin.” The coffin does open on its own, she enters it, and the lovers are buried together in the same manner as Liang and Zhu.¹

Interest in the Liang-Zhu story peaked during the period immediately following the communist takeover of China in 1949, but not because of its place in Chinese folklore. The image of Yingtai pursuing an education fit perfectly with the communist ideology of female emancipation. In the following decade more than thirty plays, films, and a world-renowned violin concerto were produced to celebrate the anti-feudal spirit of Zhu Yingtai. Official support for the Liang-Zhu story cooled considerably during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), but reemerged in the 1980s. In an attempt to restore symbols of cultural heritage destroyed by the Red Guards, the Chinese leadership launched a series of national folk literature preservation campaigns in 1984 that (among other things) stimulated Liang-Zhu research (ZHOU 2000, 2003). Scholarship during that period mostly consisted of large-scale surveys of narrations across genres, ethnicities, and regions, with a focus on historicity, sociocultural significance, narrative style, and thematic variation. In 2000 these studies and analyses were published in a four-volume collection entitled *Liang-Zhu wenhua daguan* 梁祝文化大觀 (A compendium of Liang-Zhu culture).

This collection is considered the most comprehensive on the topic, and yet it does not include the *nüshu* transliteration—an unfortunate omission, since the *nüshu* version deserves attention precisely because of its rich contextual implications. As Wilt IDEMA (1999) points out, most preserved prosimetrical texts, including *changben*, are of anonymous authorship and provide very little, if any, information in terms of timeframe, place of origin, or their intended uses and audiences. The *nüshu* transcription, however, lets us associate *changben* to a specific period (nineteenth to mid-twentieth century), a single locality (rural Jiangyong), and a specific audience (peasant women), all of which affords us an expanded conceptual horizon.

Note that the conceptual framework of contemporary Liang-Zhu scholarship is still narrowly limited in two respects. First, there is a lack of historical or regional sensitivity: laden with politically correct communist ideology and/or twentieth-century liberalist readings, most interpretations tend to reduce Yingtai’s pursuit of

education to an anti-feudalistic claim for gender equality; the co-burial becomes an act of romantic love. Second, most researchers focus on the narrative development of the Liang-Zhu storyline and overlook the power of genre to shape narration at both ideological and discursive levels. Some scholars have worked on generic comparisons—for example, Roland ALTENBURGER's (2005) fine-grained analysis of differences among the *tanci* 彈詞 (strumming lyric), *baojuan* 寶卷 (precious scroll), and *guci* 鼓詞 (drum lyric) genres. But genre is still generally conceived of as a static normative classification tool for grouping thematic, stylistic, and compositional elements, rather than a vehicle for forming theoretical constructs.

Recent research on literary criticism, linguistic anthropology, and folklore studies has shown that genre functions not only as a literary framework, but also as a way of seeing and a means of expression, since it indexes certain ideological milieus, targets certain audiences, filters what is to be seen, and orients interpretations (BAKHTIN 1981, 1986; BRIGGS and BAUMAN 1992; HANKS 1987; HARRIS 1995; WADLEY 2009). Filtering and framing define and confine a genre's expressive space, or in Mikhail BAKHTIN's (1990) terminology, its "excess of seeing." Bakhtin argues that each individual has viewing limits—for instance, we cannot see our own faces or the space behind us. These limits, however, will be reflected in the vision of others; every individual's viewing zone therefore serves as an excess of seeing in relation to all others' viewing zones, supplementing what is missing from their own vision. Characterized by this excess of seeing, every genre "leaks" in one way or another (BRIGGS and BAUMAN 1992). Another way to state this is that every genre has its own "expressive niches" (LIU 2003), its strengths and advantages for presenting the viewpoints of specific social groups, as well as for representing certain dimensions of social reality via distinct aesthetic styles.

Having conceptualized genre as an intersection of presentation, representation, and social practice, how does the *hanzi*-written Liang-Zhu ballad, contextualized (read and transcribed) by *nüshu* women in rural Jiangyong, illuminate the expressive niches of *changben*? By highlighting how a context-sensitive approach expands the scope of generic research on *changben* (or Chinese prosimetrical literature in general) from narration to reading—with literary and social implications—I will demonstrate that the *changben* genre not only structures event narration, but more importantly contains the expressive niches of articulation, transposition, and empowerment. Specifically, it permits readers to articulate, transpose, and hopefully transform the tension between transgression and compliance, social rites and personal emotions, and routines and aspirations. In this manner the genre accommodates readers' being in-the-world, while allowing them to probe beneath the surfaces of phenomena as part of their search for a new light of life in their process of becoming.

NÜSHU IN 江陽

Located in southern Hunan Province, Jiangyong County is primarily populated with Han 漢 and Yao 瑤 Chinese. A higher concentration of Yao live in lower Jiangyong; most Han and sinicized Yao residents live in upper Jiangyong,

where *nüshu* was circulated. Until the communist takeover, the upper Jiangyong (the geographic locus of this research) was characterized by the Confucian androcentric practices of patrilineality, patrilocality, and a village-based agrarian economy, with women defined by the ideology of *sancong* 三從 (thrice-following)—that is, female status was derived from relationships with father, husband, and sons. Subject to strict gender-based labor divisions, women were viewed as “inner persona” whose duties focused on household chores and needlework rather than fieldwork, especially when footbinding was a widespread practice. Unmarried women were referred to as “upstairs girls,” since they spent most of their time in groups doing embroidery and weaving in second-story rooms. These social gatherings supported the learning of *nüshu* script, sung laments, and stories.

Due to the lack of historical documentation, there is still controversy regarding when or by whom the *nüshu* script was created. One legend attributes *nüshu* to a local girl named Yuxiu 玉秀. Yuxiu was sent to the imperial palace as a concubine of Emperor Song Huizong 宋徽宗 (1082–1135). Failing to win favor with the emperor, Yuxiu is said to have created the *nüshu* script to express her misery and to warn families to “never send [your daughters] to the palace” 千萬不嫁入朝中. As to official records, the earliest known reference to *nüshu* is a 1931 description of it as “fly-head-like tiny script [蠅頭細字] that no man can read” (ZENG 1931, 99)—a comment that speaks to the marginality of *nüshu* in male-dominated Jiangyong. Reconstructing the origins of *nüshu* is made even more difficult by the local custom of burning *nüshu* texts upon their owners’ deaths, or burying them with the deceased. One woman told me about placing four texts in her grandmother’s coffin in gratitude for her *nüshu* tutoring.

Traditionally, tutoring started with singing or chanting *nüshu* stories before practicing the written script. Unlike ideographic *hanzi* characters, the *nüshu* script represents both sound and meaning. Words that sound the same can be written the same way—for example, the words for “writing” (書), “transmission” (輸), and “market” (墟) are homonyms in Jiangyong dialect, and therefore can all be written as 𠃉 in *nüshu* script. To discern its contextual reference, one has to read the whole sentence to determine what it may mean. Moreover, since *nüshu* (although a written form) must be performed by singing, this makes it largely interchangeable with the local women’s singing tradition, known as *nüge* 女歌 (female song). This explains why many of the women I met in Jiangyong could perform *nüshu* texts in the form of *nüge* but had not necessarily mastered the written script. The story of a Liang-Zhu ballad is a case in point: many elderly Jiangyong women can recite extensive portions of the text, but cannot commit it to paper.

Nüshu usage started to fade after the communist takeover of 1949. The political and social reformation required women to do farm work, and as a result they had less free time to learn *nüshu*. Moreover, with better access to education, young females had no motivation to learn a script that had emerged because of women’s marginalization. As I write this article, only a very few women still know how to write *nüshu*—these women are entitled “carriers of *nüshu* heritage” (*nüshu*

chuanren 女書傳人) by local authorities. Among them, the most prominent writers are He Yanxin 何豔新 (b. 1939) and Hu Meiyue 胡美月 (b. 1963), who learned *nüshu* in childhood from their respective grandmothers Yang Congxian 陽從仙 (ca. 1874–1960) and Gao Yinxian 高銀仙 (1902–1990).² Gao Yinxian was also the first identified *nüshu* practitioner when the script and practices around it were discovered in 1982. In the following years, Yi Nianhua 義年華 (1907–1991) and Yang Huanyi 陽煥宜 (1909–2004) were also identified, and altogether some five hundred pieces of *nüshu* and *nüge* have been collected and published since then (END 1996; GONG 1991; XIE 1991; ZHAO et al. 1992; ZHAO 2005).

The collected *nüshu* and *nüge* provide a window into the everyday lives of rural daughters, mothers, and wives in Jiangyong. Before marriage, young girls wrote *nüshu* letters to form ritually sworn sisterhood pacts (CHIANG 1995; LIU 2004b; SILBER 1994). Brides performed *nüge* laments at their weddings, and their peers or female relatives prepared and presented them with bridal *nüshu* literature called *sanzhaoshu* 三朝書 (third-day books) (LIU 2004b, 2005; ZHAO 1995). Married women relied on *nüshu* texts as sources of strength over the course of their difficult lives. Sonless mothers wrote *nüshu* prayers to local female deities worshipped in temples of Huashanmiao 花山廟 and Longyantang 龍眼塘, and widows composed biographic laments to assuage their frustrations and to evoke sympathy (LIU 2001). Some women may have also composed narratives as commentary on extraordinary events they had observed, such as women courageously saving men's lives, or stories of notorious extramarital affairs (LIU 2004a, 2007).

In addition to creating original compositions, *nüshu* was also used to record favorite *changben* ballads from the standard Chinese. In Jiangyong, *changben* were traditionally performed by amateur male peasant actors during the winter months when all harvest work was completed.³ Written in seven-syllable lines, these long stories were challenging to memorize and recite. The Jiangyong women took advantage of their *nüshu* script to transcribe *changben* verbatim so they could enjoy the stories again at their convenience. Both He Yanxin and Hu Meiyue recalled vividly how their grandmothers would sing *nüshu changben* for entertainment when old friends came to visit.

The *changben* that circulated in Jiangyong primarily featured female virtues (for example, fidelity and filiality), strengths (courage and wisdom), vulnerabilities (the dangers of leaving their inner quarters), hopes for justice, and fantasies of imagined lives. Popular titles include *Sangu ji* 三姑記 (The Tale of the Third Sister), in which a filial daughter treats her mother with care, even though she is the target of maternal hatred and told to remarry because of her husband's destitution; *Maibua nü* 賣花女 (The Flower-Selling Girl), about a virtuous wife who supports her family when her husband is unable to do so; *Luoshi nü* 羅氏女 (Lady Luo), *Xiaoshi nü* 肖氏女 (Lady Xiao), and *Meng jiang nü* 孟姜女 (The Maiden Meng Jiang), all stories about chaste women who demonstrate a strong will and perseverance in the face of the prolonged absences of their husbands; *Wangwu niang* 王五娘 (Fifth Daughter Wang), which describes a pious woman who is rewarded with rebirth as a man; and *Liyu jing* 鯉魚精 (Demonic Carp), about a victimized woman who

approaches Judge Bao 包公 to ask for justice (IDEMA 2009; LIU and HU 1994; MCLAREN 1996). The Liang-Zhu story is a rare exception, with its theme of adolescent romance, involving a young girl disguised as a man to study and travel.⁴

Many Jiangyong women apparently transliterated the Liang-Zhu ballad into *nüshu*, including Hu Cizhu 胡慈珠 (ca. 1900–1976), Gao Yinxian, Yi Nianhua, Yang Huanyi, He Yanxin, and Hu Meiyue—which points to the tale’s real popularity in this rural community. These *nüshu* texts are very much alike and they are almost identical to a handwritten copy of the story I procured from a male peasant in Shangjiangxu 上江墟 in 1992, a copy carrying the title *Xinke Liang Shanbo fangyou* 新刻梁山伯訪友 (Liang Shanbo Visits his Friend, newly carved edition) made by Xiye Dufengtang 西椰渡楓堂 in Yongzhou 永州, the county’s higher administrative center. Quite possibly, this Yongzhou edition is the source of most *nüshu* Liang-Zhu *changben*. Tang Baozhen 唐寶珍 (ca. 1910–1999), a highly talented *nüge* performer, told me that her sworn sister Hu Cizhu’s *changben* transliterations were based on “*hanzi*-written small books” purchased at the market. Tang was unclear how the *hanzi*-illiterate Cizhu managed to do so. But according to He Yanxin, her grandfather had read the *changben* stories for her grandmother, Yang Congxian, to transcribe in *nüshu*, even though Yang herself could read and write the official *hanzi* script.

In the following analysis I focus on Gao Yinxian’s transliteration, since it was one of the *nüshu* examples that made the practice known to the outside world (GONG 1991; XIE 1991; ZHAO et al., eds.; ZHAO, ed., 1992, 2005; see IDEMA 2009 for an English translation). According to Tang Baozhen, Gao Yinxian’s Liang-Zhu was given to her by Hu Cizhu, a prolific *nüshu* writer who died in 1976 before *nüshu* was discovered.

THE BALLAD OF LIANG SHANBO AND - HU YINGTAI

The Liang-Zhu *nüshu* begins with a *changben*-specific formulaic opening: “I will not sing of any former kings or of the Later Han. Listen as I sing of the story of Zhu Yingtai” 不唱前王並後漢 / 聽唱英台女嬌娘. Yingtai, the only child of a very rich family, is described as “clever and witty” 伶俐. She expresses a desire to travel to Hangzhou 杭州 to study, but is scolded by her father, for “Only boys are allowed to enter the academy / When have women ever been allowed to enter school?” 只有男子入書院 / 哪有女兒進學堂. He threatens to cut the father-daughter tie with Yingtai, but Yingtai makes the following argument:

The Bodhisattva Guanyin of the South Sea was originally a woman,
 She recited the sutras in the Buddhist hall all day.
 Emperor Zetian was born a woman,
 She managed the empire and ruled across rivers and mountains...
 Now squire Zhu of E’mei has a daughter,
 She wishes to go to Hangzhou to enter school (see FIGURE 1 for *nüshu* script).
 南海觀音原是女 / 長日念經坐佛堂 / 則天皇帝一女身 / 總管山河實威風... /
 峨嵋祝公生一女 / 要到杭州進入學堂

南海觀音原是女，長日念經坐佛堂

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峨嵋祝公生一女，要到杭州進學堂

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FIGURE 1: *Nüshu*-Transcribed Liang-Zhu by He Yanxin.

Her father eventually gives in to her request, so Yingtai leaves her home dressed as “a manly officer of the court.” On her way to the academy she meets a young man named Liang Shanbo and swears brotherhood with him. They travel together to Hangzhou and at the academy they develop a fast friendship:

They share books, writing brush, and inkstone.
They walk and sit together during the day.
They share the same quilt and couch at night.

筆共硯石書共箱 / 白天同行同凳坐 / 夜間同被又同床

Such intimacy gives Shanbo opportunities to wonder about Yingtai’s gender—for example, when Yingtai gets up in the middle of the night to urinate, Shanbo notices that she squats instead of standing up. When confronted, Yingtai argues,

People who study books revere Heaven and Earth.
Above us are the sun and moon, together with the three luminaries.
During daytime divine immortals come among us.
During nighttime the stars illuminate the world.
To urinate standing up is the way of cows and horses,
To lower one’s body to defecate is the way of the gods.

讀書之人敬天地 / 上有日月並三光 / 日段亦有神仙過 / 夜間星斗照四方 / 高身出便是牛馬 / 低身出便是仙郎

While bathing, Shanbo happens to see Yingtai’s uncovered upper body, “exposing a pair of fragrant breasts” 露出一對丁香奶. Shanbo asks about this, and Yingtai responds,

People who have good luck have large breasts,
But people without good luck have no breasts.
A man with large breasts is bound to achieve high office,
But a woman with large breasts will lead a lonely life.

有福之人奶子大 / 無福之人無奶房 / 男子奶大得官做 / 女子奶大守空房

In the middle of a hot summer, five hundred students go to the academy’s rear courtyard to take a bath, but Yingtai stays behind. She addresses her classmates’ suspicion by proclaiming,

I am not in the mood whatsoever to take a bath now,
I only wish to master my learning and go home.
I’m concerned that my parents are getting on in years,
And I also left my unmarried sister behind.
Cow and horse return for the night to their shed,
Can’t a human being long to return home?

我今無心去打澡 / 熟讀文章去回鄉 / 堂上還怕爺娘老 / 房中留下女嬌娘 / 牛馬夜來歸欄內 / 人生豈不思家鄉

After three years of study, Yingtai and Shanbo “had cultivated knowledge and talents beyond compare” 經濟奇才世無雙. Yingtai thought it was time to return home, since

If one does not exhaust oneself in filial caring,
One cannot be counted as a human being and filial child.

為人若不盡孝養 / 枉為人倫無孝郎

Yingtai takes her leave, and Shanbo accompanies her for a few miles before they bid farewell. Unlike in the past, on their farewell journey Yingtai uses every opportunity to reveal her true identity and to disclose her wish to marry Shanbo:

Elder brother has accompanied me to this wall.
Against the wall is the fine branch of a pomegranate tree.
I would like to pick a pomegranate for my brother,
But fear he'll steal more if he finds it tasty.
Elder brother has accompanied me to this pond.
In the pond are reflections of good appearances.
With destined affinity, people will meet despite a thousand miles between them.
Without such karmic affinity, next-door neighbors will not get together.
Elder brother has accompanied me to this well.
On the water of this well is a pair of mandarin ducks.
One is a drake, the other a female.
What is needed in between is a matchmaker.
Elder brother has accompanied me to the river.
On the riverbank is a fishing boat.
It is only the boat that goes and moors at the bank,
Never will the bank go and moor at the boat.

哥哥送我到牆頭 / 牆頭一樹好石榴 / 我想摘個哥哥吃 / 想有滋味再來偷 / 哥哥送我到池塘 / 池塘遇見好顏容 / 有緣千里來相會 / 無緣對面不相逢 / 哥哥送我到井中 / 井中有對好鴛鴦 / 一個公來一個母 / 中間少個做媒娘 / 哥哥送我到江邊 / 江邊有隻打漁船 / 只有船來去就岸 / 哪有岸中去就船

At a wharf, a ferryman refuses to take them across a river because they have no money. Yingtai jumps into the water with all her clothes on and speaks the following crucial lines to Shanbo:

The water soaks the Dragon's Gate, the gate of the character *ding*.
It just soaks to the height of the character *kou*.
Elder Brother, if you can figure out what it means,
I'll discuss the matter again with you further on.
But if you can't solve this riddle,
You go back to the academy and I return home.

水浸龍門丁字口 / 剛剛浸到口字旁 / 哥哥若還想得出 / 前面與你再商量 / 哥哥若還想不出 / 你回書院我回鄉

Yingtai also reminds Shanbo that it is time for him to go home after three years of study, for doing so was part of “the rites and righteousness” (*liyi* 禮義) of scholars. She tells Shanbo where she lives, and invites him to visit. After saying good-bye, Shanbo’s heart is filled with sorrow and solitude. Unable to decode Yingtai’s riddle, Shanbo asks a fortuneteller to draw a hexagram for an answer. The diviner finds promising signs:

First, your beloved has just left, not far from here.
 Second, marriage is quite fitting right now.
 Dear Sir, you should return to your family soon.
 There is no need for further study, go home without delay!

一占情人去不遠 / 二占婚姻正相當 / 相公即起回家去 / 不必久念快歸鄉

Shanbo accepts the advice and immediately leaves. On his way home he stops at Yingtai’s village, approaches a young boy, and asks about Yingtai, with whom “I shared the same quilt and the same couch for three years” 三年同被又同床.

The boy answers,

She is an elegant lady of a family,
 How could she share with you quilt and couch?

她是人家嬌娥女 / 如何與你就同床

It is only at this point that Shanbo fully understands that his “sworn brother” is actually a “sister.” Meanwhile, informed of Shanbo’s visit, Yingtai quickly dresses herself in male clothes to greet him, and they discuss scholarly topics. When it is time for his departure, Yingtai tells Shanbo,

Do not put much thought on women.
 In this life we cannot be united in marriage,
 But we will in each following life, each new existence!

少把心思置女娘 / 在生不得成婚配 / 來生來世結成雙

Upon hearing these words, Shanbo gets sick. Filled with love-longing all the way, he returns home.

Before his arrival, Shanbo’s mother wonders and prays, “Originally he said he’d go and study for three years, why hasn’t he returned?” 原說讀書三年滿 / 如今許久未回鄉. Just before she finishes her prayer, Shanbo appears before her but he looks terrible. His mother wonders what has happened. Shanbo explains that it is all because of a good friend he made in Hangzhou,

At that time he was a normal male,
 But after he went back home, he turned into a pretty girl.
 Admiring how clever and intelligent she is,
 I’m overcome with longing to become her husband!

去時一個男子漢 / 回來一個女嬌娘 / 孩兒見她多伶俐 / 心中思想結成雙

To fulfill his wishes, Shanbo's mother calls on the Zhu family to propose a marriage between the two offspring, but she is too late—Yingtai's father has already promised her to young Mr. Ma. Upon learning that Shanbo's mother is visiting, Yingtai dresses up to receive her and asks her to deliver a message to her son:

Do not allow your heart to be broken over me.
In this life we can never become husband and wife,
But we will after our deaths, at the Yellow Springs!

少把心思掛我腸 / 在生不得為夫婦 / 死在黃泉結成雙

Yingtai then writes a prescription for Shanbo, one containing ten impossible ingredients such as horn of the Dragon King, the liver of a phoenix, and the crest on the Buddha's head. She tells his mother,

If you cannot obtain these ten miraculous ingredients,
His soul will go and meet with King of Hell (Yama).
If Brother Liang passes away,
Make sure to bury him by the Ma family road ...
One day his sworn sister will pass his grave,
And offer a sacrifice of the three animals and a libation of wine.

不得十分真好藥 / 請你一命見閻王 / 若是梁兄身亡故 / 要葬馬家大路旁..... / 有朝
愚妹墳前過 / 三牲酒禮來上香

When Shanbo hears that the marriage proposal has been rejected, “his depression turns into an illness that carries him away” 氣成一病喪黃泉. On the day of Yingtai's marriage, she asks her wedding chair escorts to take her to where Shanbo is buried. Upon their arrival, Yingtai leaves her sedan chair and cries,

“Dear Brother Liang!
If your spirit has the power, please open the grave.
So that we may become a couple on the Yellow Springs road.”
Before she had finished her words, there comes a loud noise,
The tomb opens, split up the middle.
Yingtai rushes forward and jumps into the grave.

叫聲哥哥梁大郎 / 有靈有神開墳墓 / 黃泉路上結成雙 / 言之未了一聲響 / 只見墳台
折兩廂 / 英台急忙墳中入

In a panic, all of the bystanders try to pull her out, but only succeed in tearing her clothes into many pieces. And then,

The Ma family rushes forward to open the grave,
[Shanbo and Yingtai], changed to pair of mandarin ducks, fly into the sky.

馬家急忙開墳墓 / 變對鴛鴦飛上天

The story concludes:

Shanbo was a golden lad who descended to earth,
 Yingtai a jade maiden who came down to mortal dust.
 The two of them went off to the heavenly palace,
 Where they paid their respects to the Jade Emperor.
 And this is the end of the book of Yingtai,
 A book for later generations to read and savor.

山伯金童來降世 / 英台玉女下凡塵 / 二人立時天堂去 / 玉皇台前去問安 / 這本英台
 從此斷 / 留歸後人細細看

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Given Confucian social structure, Yingtai's desire to study in a faraway city can be viewed as both adventurous and transgressive, worthy of strong objections from her father. To convince him, she gives examples of past women's secular and spiritual accomplishments: Wu Zetian, the only female emperor in Chinese history, and Guanyin, the most important female deity in Chinese Buddhism. She thus presents an alternative to the prevailing rural ideology that "untalented women are virtuous" 女子無才便是德.

While her literary interests could be interpreted as being based on individual aspirations, her cross-dressing and studying/living among men was a direct challenge to existing gender relations. Success in her audacious endeavor would make her a heroine; failure would render her unchaste, ruin her family's reputation, and challenge the morals of her community. Due to this corrupting potential, a Ming scholar official named Wei Chengzhong 魏成忠 went so far as to cut from the story any references to the two protagonists as classmates or roommates (FENG 1930). However, the episodes once officially banned have remained popular in folk literature; they are also where we see how Jiangyong women envision gender differences and heterosexual friendship.

Gender differences in this ballad are mostly referred to in physical terms, such as ways of urinating and breast size. Yingtai's articulations regarding these physical differences destabilize (if not reverse) the existing culturally constructed gender hierarchy: they depict males as unsophisticated and subject to manipulation by a superior female. Her narration also seems to value androgyny: large breasts, a mark of femininity, are described as a sign of promise and good fortune for men, but of misfortune for women. Yingtai's cross-dressing can also be interpreted as a social form of androgyny that disguises her female identity. This disguise protects her from the male gaze and violation. But note, it is only a partial protection: she must also use a mix of intelligence and eloquence to deflect questions about her "peculiar" physical traits. In the story, Yingtai is clearly aware of the danger of her sexuality, a sense most strongly suggested in her use of the pomegranate image—a metaphor for fertility, a consequence of sexual intercourse. She fears that Shanbo might "steal more if he finds it tasty."

Cross-dressing here, as ALTENBURGER (2005) has noted, combines two contradictory impulses: covering up, and seeking to reveal.⁵ As the Liang-Zhu connection moves from cohabitation to separation, the discourse shifts from concealment to revelation. Yingtai indirectly discloses her feelings toward Shanbo in analogies involving karmic affinity, the matchmaker figure, and the cultural protocol of male initiative—“Never will the bank go and moor at the boat.” But Shanbo remains unaware of the underlying meaning, especially when Yingtai presents him with the riddle, “The water soaks the Dragon’s Gate, the gate of character *ding* / It just soaks to the height of the character *kou*.”⁶ The word *kou* (口 in *hanzi* and 𠂇 in *nüshu*) refers to “gate” or “mouth,” implying a woman’s vagina. By contrast, the semantic meaning of *ding* (丁 in *hanzi* and 𠂇 in *nüshu*) is “man,” and its shape resembles the male sex organ (YAN 1953). By insinuating her identity, this riddle is a powerful expression of Yingtai’s sexuality, if not attraction.

The tension between concealment and disclosure highlights the dialogic interaction between rites and emotions. Whereas emotions reflect personal yearning and desire, rites are designated according to social roles. Yingtai is challenged by the incompatibility between her personal desires and social regulations, made more complex by the multiple roles she assumes. She may be viewed as subversive while trespassing in male domains, but her transgressions serve only as a “liminal” stage in her personal rite of passage (GENNE 1960). She knows that she will eventually return to her status as a filial daughter, to be wed to a man of her father’s choosing. However, her adventure has nurtured new identities outside the prescribed daughter-wife-mother roles of *sancong*, creating conflict she must negotiate in her social relations and cultural persona. Her filial obligation as a daughter means that she cannot refuse the marriage her father has arranged. As a Confucian student, she is obligated to observe the guidelines of “rites and righteousness,” meaning she must give up her romantic interest in Shanbo. She is trapped between gender codes, social expectations, and personal desires.

Her daughterly identity prevails. In the *changben* she makes a clear Confucian proclamation that “if one does not exhaust oneself in filial caring, one cannot be counted a human being.” She admonishes Shanbo to “not put much thought on women,” since she understands that once he discovers the truth of the situation, he will not be able to overcome his sense of loss. The only hope for them to marry is a miracle, as indicated in the prescription containing “miraculous ingredients” that she gives to Shanbo’s mother. No miracle appears in life, but she creates a situation in which a miracle can occur: whether or not Shanbo’s tomb opens will determine whom she couples with—her beloved or the designated fiancé. In this way she manages to articulate both filiality to her father and loyalty to her companion. The one Confucian principle she fails to fulfill is that of dutiful daughter-in-law to the family of her betrothed.

Shanbo’s multiple roles as friend, lover, and Confucian scholar (perhaps a pedant, judging from his inability to decode Yingtai’s riddle) are less contradictory, but still require negotiation. In contrast to Yingtai’s escape from becoming a daughter-in-law, Shanbo fails to fulfill his filial duties—serving his parents and producing

male offspring. He is less affected by the conflict between romance and filiality than by the psychological adjustment required by his changing perspective on and relationship with Yingtai. Unfulfilled, he perishes from despondency. In a worldly sense, he exhibits vulnerability and weakness by surrendering to his emotions; spiritually, he demonstrates honesty by acknowledging his emotions, and strength by entombing his beloved. In the end it is Shanbo, not Yingtai, who exerts final dominion over their connection.

Shanbo's dominion seems to be endorsed by higher powers: the lovers are transformed into a pair of mandarin ducks (a symbol of marital concord), and they ascend to the shelter of Heaven. But note, the author reminds readers in conclusion that Shanbo and Yingtai are not humans ascending to Heaven but divine beings who descended to the secular world. They come to make manifest the Heavenly Mandate that social order is beyond the control of any individual, whether Yingtai or Shanbo. In the end, the chaos created by Yingtai's cross-dressing and Shanbo's obsession must comply with the doctrines of filial piety and androcentrism—transgressions as such are only possible in a fantasy world—otherwise, tragedy is the sole destiny.

FROM TEXT TO CONTEXT

The above Liang-Zhu *changben* highlights societal ideologies of women's roles and gender boundaries, differences, and interactions. Although it was transcribed in *nüshu*, this text—which quite possibly was originally written in the official *hanzi* and by a male elite, with peasants (of both genders) as its target audience—does not merely mirror Jiangyong women's social milieu. When contextualizing this *changben* in the localized setting, we can see how it reflects and refracts *nüshu* women's inner world and outer reality.

The coexistence of reflection and refraction is best manifested in the female protagonist, a character mixed with traditional and nontraditional personas. In addition to being adventurous but filial, rebellious but virtuous, learned but not pedantic, Yingtai is charismatic and admirable, but also unreal and unrealistic. Her adherence to the ideal of female chastity when sharing the same sleeping mat with a young man speaks to Jiangyong women's moral attitudes regarding physical love and perhaps their aspirations for romantic sentiment. Although romantic sentiment, or longing for love, is not a predominant theme in *nüshu*, one can still find examples that circulated in Jiangyong. In one *nüshu* narrative, sympathy is expressed for a young girl named Yulian 玉蓮 who indulges in fantasies about a young man who saves her from sexual violence during a Lantern Festival (see ZHAO et al. 1992, 469–70). Less sympathy is accorded women who participate in extramarital affairs: in a *nüshu* written about an actual incident in the 1920s, a woman called Zhuzhu 珠珠 is ridiculed and reproached for her liaison with a local school teacher (LIU 2007).

In addition to being virtuous, the main female character in the Liang-Zhu *changben* is clever and eloquent. For Jiangyong women, Yingtai's talents and

pursuit of knowledge are at most examples of wishful thinking. Although women from elite families in the urbanized lower Yangzi region of China (the location of the academy in the story) were allowed to study starting in the sixteenth century (HU 2003; IDEMA and GRANT 2004; MANN 1997; WIDMER 1989; WIDMER and CHANG 2003), women in rural Jiangyong were largely denied access to *hanzi* education. *Nüshu* literacy was also low due to the combination of an agrarian lifestyle, lack of male patronage, and an unsupportive social infrastructure (LIU 2004b; TANG 1995). *Nüshu* in Jiangyong can therefore be considered an example of “cultural capital” (BOURDIEU 1977), with established *nüshu* writers such as He Yunzhu 何韻竹 receiving respect both during their lifetimes and afterwards. But they are exceptions; only a handful of Jiangyong peasant women could even envision Yingtai’s educational experience.

The same is true for the story’s descriptions of heterosexual interactions, intimations of sexual attraction, and cross-dressing. Rural Jiangyong girls were severely restricted in terms of movement, only rarely allowed visits to other villages, and interactions with men who were not relatives or acknowledged family friends were essentially unthinkable. In contrast, women living in the lower Yangzi (where Yingtai studied) could meet outside their homes and mingle socially with male literati through gatherings such as poetry clubs during the Qing period (1644–1911) (KO 1994; ZHONG 2000). In Jiangyong, even prospective marital partners (often arranged in childhood) had to avoid visiting each other’s villages. Prior to the communist takeover in 1949, wanting to see one’s betrothed in person would have been viewed as so extraordinary that it would have been recorded as a *nüshu* story, as in the case of one narrative about a young lady from the Zhou family 周家 who went to visit the village of her paternal aunt where her betrothed lived (see ZHAO et al. 1992, 590–91).

Similarly, there has long been a strong cultural taboo against talking about sex in rural Jiangyong—women were prohibited from singing *shan’ge* 山歌 (mountain songs) due to their implied sexual imagery. This underscores the uniqueness of the Liang-Zhu *changben*, in which sexual differences are presented in a straightforward manner: urinating position, breast size, and “the mouth of the *ding*.” Part of the story’s popularity among Jiangyong women may be due to its transgression into this “forbidden zone.” As to cross-dressing, a major theme in Ming-Qing scholar-beauty literature (for example, novels and plays)—say, a woman may disguise as man in order to travel safely or to pursue high rank and office (see HU 2003; IDEMA and GRANT 2004)—it was rare in Jiangyong. The only case that was reported to me concerned a woman who dressed as a groom to stand in for her brother at his wedding ritual because he had been conscripted into the army.

Of all of Yingtai’s actions and decisions, the most unimaginable (and perhaps the most important in the minds of the *nüshu* audiences) is her avoidance of her responsibilities as a dutiful daughter-in-law—a central life issue for women in traditional Jiangyong. Two ritually defined *nüshu* and *nüge* categories are specifically aimed at this issue: bridal laments and *sanzhaoshu* wedding literature (LIU 2005;

SILBER 1994). For example, a wedding lament performed in the 1950s contained the following advice for the bride:

As a daughter, you can always steal some free moments.
 As a daughter-in-law, joys are controlled by his mother's hands.
 When the sun is high, the cogon grass is down.
 While being a daughter-in-law, whatever the situation, you have to lower your head...
 A stone mountain is hard to move, but temperament is easier to change.
 Do change your temperament to serve the six relations,
 To yield to the girls in the house, to submit to your parents-in-law, and
 To accommodate all the people in the world.

做女歡樂偷身出 / 做媳歡樂問他娘 / 日頭照下苗垂下 / 女不低頭要低頭 ... / 石山難
 移性易改 / 改變性情待六親 / 一就姑娘二就馳 / 三就世間十分難

Compare this advice with the Liang-Zhu *changben*, in which Yingtai defies affinal authority by wailing for her beloved by his tomb while dressed as a bride about to enter another man's family. Compared to the way she coolly handles near discoveries of her gender identity at the academy, her emotional behavior at the grave is provocative and unrealistic; its potential insult to her affines seriously jeopardizes her relations with them—especially her mother-in-law, who has the power to make Yingtai's life miserable.

Shanbo also has social and non-social personas. His social characteristics are manifested in two ways. The first is his strong affective bond with Yingtai, which initially takes the form of ritual brotherhood (or sisterhood), a common practice in Jiangyong marked by such acts as sharing clothes and sleeping in the same bed (CHIANG 1995; LIU 2004b; SILBER 1995). Second, Shanbo's opening of his tomb for Yingtai to enter can be viewed as an act of male supremacy that was the norm in rural Jiangyong society.⁷ Yingtai may have been a powerful female, but her influence required cross-dressing, cunning, and sophisticated argumentation. In terms of brute formal authority, in the end it is held by the male figure in the story.

In another sense, nevertheless, Shanbo is outside the reach of social regulation. He set aside his worldly responsibilities as a son in the name of romantic love—pure fantasy for rural peasant women. My informant Meiyue described such a love-struck male as too good to be true: "If all men were like Shanbo, women's lives would be easier." Indeed, it is nearly impossible to find another Shanbo-like character in *nǚshu* literature, which contains descriptions of women sacrificing their lives for men, but not vice versa. In daily life, Jiangyong men were rarely (if ever) willing to express affection toward their wives in public. Should the news get out that a man had helped his wife with a domestic chore such as laundry, he would become a target for ridicule. In conflicts between mothers and wives, men usually sided with their mothers to demonstrate their filial respect; moreover, it was not unusual for a man to beat his wife according to his mother's wishes. In the Liang-Zhu *changben*, however, Shanbo dies for romantic love. He also neglects his obligation to produce a male heir—highly unlikely and an impractical act of

negligence in agrarian Jiangyong, where male labor was considered crucial to survival. Even nowadays, agrarian patrilineal values are still prevalent, despite the migration of many villagers to coastal cities in search of jobs. For example, He Yanxin, a prolific *nüshu* writer, insists that her two youngest sons get married, since “eventually they will have to move back to the village, where you just need the next generation to take care of you in your old age. That is the rural reality.”

GENERIC EXPRESSIVE NICHES:
ARTICULATION, TRANSPOSITION, AND EMPOWERMENT

The Liang-Zhu story is full of twists and turns, and ample space for envisioning the real and the fictive. It all begins with Yingtai’s desire to study among men at a faraway academy. Her rebellious ways highlight the social concerns of womanhood (female talent and chastity) and challenge Confucian gender boundaries. Her scholarly interactions with her sworn brother Shanbo ferment into romantic longing, further complicating intricate negotiations among the protagonists’ diverse social roles. Yingtai makes compromises of compliance and transgression among the real and potential roles of filial daughter, dutiful daughter-in-law, friend, and lover. Shanbo struggles to comprehend his changing relationship with Yingtai, to disentangle the conflict between friendship and romance, and to confront the clash between personal emotion and enforced patrilineality. The many fine points of the story encourage entextualization of the event as a *changben* narrative. This in turn invites audiences to read and interact with the text, and in the case of Jiangyong women, to transcribe it into *nüshu*. Entextualization and reading engage both the genre in which the narrative is poetically framed, and the context in which the event is narrated and received. Due to distinct contextual dynamics, *changben* as a narrative cannot be simply understood as a transparent reflection of the lived reality of its audience community, but rather a horizon wherein the cultural configurations of the received local community and mainstream societal expectations are infused.

The analysis offered in this article shows that Yingtai and Shanbo exist both “within” and “beyond” the agrarian setting of Jiangyong. The “within” illuminates *nüshu* women’s core values—female chastity, filial piety, sworn siblinghood, and male supremacy—and the “beyond” supports aspirations and fantasies such as female education, exemption from the tyranny of mothers-in-law, romantic love over patrilineal responsibility, and companionate marital union. These within/beyond coordinates structure the expressive niches of *changben*. For Jiangyong women, these narratives facilitated the articulation of complex inner sensibilities concerning struggles with social institutions and offered a space for transposing and ameliorating (if not suspending) daily frustrations, thus providing them the strength to confront their dilemmas. In this sense, transpositional space equals empowerment space: while transforming the unreal into the fathomable and the ordinary into the extraordinary, *changben* such as the Liang-Zhu story inspired hope for traversing between actual and fantasized worlds, and thus shed promising light on peasant women’s day-to-day existence.

NOTES

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1. Another story that is also often mentioned is Hanpin Qi 韓憑妻 (Hanpin's wife), which first appeared in *Soushen ji* 搜神記 compiled by GAN (1985).

2. Stimulated by *nüshu* research since the 1980s, some Jiangyong women have become interested in their *nüshu* heritage. One example is He Jinghua 何靜華 (b. 1939), who learned *nüshu* from Zhou Shuoyi 周碩沂 (1926–2006, a local *nüshu* collector) in 1996 to express her frustrations upon the death of her son. Unlike He Yanxin and Hu Meiyue, she did not learn *nüshu* until she was in her sixties.

3. The performer usually accompanied his *changben* singing performance with a “fish-drum” (*yugu* 魚鼓).

4. Yingtai is not the first case of male disguise in Chinese folk literature; a more classic and well-known legend is that of Hua Mulan 花木蘭, who dresses like a warrior and goes off to battle on her father's behalf. But Hua Mulan is not popular in Jiangyong—as far as I know, not a single *nüshu* work refers to this female figure.

5. ALTENBURGER (2005) notices that while the genre of song-drama emphasizes Yingtai's efforts to reveal her female sex, the prosimetrical narrative focuses on her difficulties in keeping up the disguise.

6. In the Yongzhou *hanzi changben* version, *kou* (口) is written as *ke* (可). However, since both words are pronounced similarly in Jiangyong dialect, they both are represented by the same *nüshu* graph. As a result, when transliterated back into *hanzi* Chinese, it becomes *kou* (口). As far as I know, *kou* (gate, mouth) is also how Jiangyong people understand the text (see for example, He Yanxin's own transliteration in ZHAO 2005, 4116).

7. Yingtai's throwing herself into the tomb can be easily related to widow chastity whereby wives sometimes committed suicide on the death of their spouse to signify their faithfulness, but this is hardly the case in Jiangyong. For widowhood in Jiangyong, see LIU 2001.

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