

**Chen Duansheng and Meng Lijun:
The Woman Author and Her Heroine Ahead of the Time**

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Chu Ying-tai (祝英台) and Mulan (木蘭) are not the only two prominent female characters in the traditional Chinese literature whose stories took place as they dressed up as boys. Chu Ying-tai's story was a sad romance and Mulan's was a military triumph. On the other hand, in *Marriage for the Next Life* (《再生緣》), written during the Qianlong (乾隆) period, the heroine Meng Lijun (孟麗君) was a political success. Chen Duansheng (陳端生), the main author of this Tanci (彈詞-- a ballad in the southern dialects, using seven characters in a line) was conspicuously a woman herself. ¹

The story: Meng Lijun was a beautiful and talented girl engaged with Huangpu Shaohua. When the emperor's brother-in-law Liu failed to take her as wife, he made a false accusation of both Meng and Huangpu families and tricked the emperor to decree that Meng Lijun marry Liu. She dressed up as a man and escaped. Later she went through examinations, got Zhuangyuan (狀元) and finally made her way to the prime minister. She managed the country well and successfully exonerated both her own family and that of her fiancé. She also put Liu to prison when she found evidence for his treason. Now her father and brother became her colleagues in the same imperial court and her fiancé became her disciple. However, she refused to admit her identity to them. Eventually the emperor realized that his prime minister was female and wanted to take her as concubine. Meng Lijun was put to such anguish that she spit out blood. Chen Duansheng ended her 17 volumes of Tanci here and Liang

Desheng (梁德繩) continued with a happy ending that Meng Lijun was clever enough to escape that destiny and married her fiancé.

At initial reading, we may find it a trite story of fight between the good and evil plus conflict in the arranged marriage. But here I will only focus on the very original: the part that Chen Duansheng wrote, which was everything but trite.

According to Sigmund Freud, to some degree, creative writers are daydreamers who derive happiness from their works just like what children do from their games of fantasies. The wishes of the writers often come from their experience and are realized in their works.² Therefore, sometimes a literary story is telling about its author and can be seen as a reflection of the reality, or to be more exact, the opposite of it.

Indeed, in his article *On "Marriage for the Next Life"*, a famous Chinese scholar Chen Yinke (1890—1969) concluded that "Meng Lijun was Chen Duansheng's ideal and she unconsciously depicted her in such an elaborate manner that Meng Lijun became her own image in the mirror."³ He compared Chen Duansheng's experience and the story of the heroine. He found quite a few striking links between them, such as the important places in Chen Duansheng's life which also appeared in the story and the comparable relationships with father and brothers. Chen Duansheng was a "nü-shih, the truly learned female, (who) studied the same classical canon as her brothers."⁴ She had a grandfather who was highly accomplished in scholarship and she herself was very talented, more talented than her father, uncle and brothers, which even rendered her somewhat proud. (Her disregard to her male relatives was shown in Meng Lijun's attitude to her father and brother in the story.) But since Chen

Duansheng was a woman she could not sit for the civil service examinations which were “exclusively male domains” and get a position in the government, “the most prestigious career open to elite men”.⁵ After all, “all daughters, regardless of class, were educated to work and to procreate in the service of a male line.”⁶ But in the story, Meng Lijun, also a nü-shih, miraculously succeeded above everyone else, ranking just below the emperor. So Chen Duansheng’s request for equality and freedom and her daydream of self-realization were fulfilled in Meng Lijun, at least partially.

Different from the story of Chu Ying-tai which focuses on her education experience, Meng Lijun’s story is about how she used her education to an end. It was a deadly crime to cheat the emperor so she relentlessly kept concealing her identity, but apparently she also enjoyed being a prime minister and managing the country, despite of the fact that initially she merely wanted to exonerate the two families. While admittedly educated women’s role in the nation was important, it was for a kingly transformation about their influence on their sons and grandsons who shaped the government of the empire.⁷ But in the story, Meng Lijun got involved directly and prominently in the government.

However, what Meng Lijun achieved was more than a political success, which was probably a dream of Chen Duansheng. Furthermore, she went so far as to challenge the three Basic Guidelines intrinsic in the conventional Chinese values, i.e. ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife (三綱: 君為臣綱、父為子綱、夫為妻綱). For the first guideline, Meng Lijun resisted the emperor’s imperial edict forcing her to marry Liu and escaped. As the prime minister, she refused to take off the emperor’s dragon robe for him. After her identity was discovered by the emperor, she went on to refuse to be his concubine. For the second guideline, Meng Lijun once scolded her parents for

their claim on her as their daughter in the presence of the emperor and caused them to lose face. On quite a few occasions, her father-in-law-to-be knelt down and kowtowed to her as she ranked much higher than he. For the third guideline, Huangpu Shaohua, her husband-to-be was her disciple and kowtowed to her. In one embodiment of Meng Lijun, Chen Duansheng challenged these three fundamental principles with justification. No wonder would Chen Yinke claim that “Duansheng’s ideas of freedom, self-esteem and independence were astonishing and disturbing in her time and even in the following a hundred years, which brought her some reproach.”⁸ In fact, this reproach came as quickly as in the story itself: in the 20th volume written by Liang Desheng, Meng Lijun’s father-in-law got the chance to admonish her for her habitual pride and disrespectfulness in her speech and behavior, while in Qing Dynasty, women’s speech’s “most important quality is deferential obedience.”⁹

But it should also be noted that the tools that Meng Lijun employed to challenge the inequality contained in the guidelines, especially in those on the relationship with father and husband, were still an element of the whole system: the power as a male with high office and status, which by itself meant hierarchical inequality. She just used one part of the system to oppose another part of it. And she could not and she never attempted to exert her power in her true identity as daughter and wife. This ready submission to the reality signified the limitation of Chen Duansheng’s literary thoughts and efforts.

For all her ambitious thoughts and dreams, Chen Duansheng was a good wife and mother attending her family well. She could clearly differentiate the reality and her dream. She surely never attempted to climb the government ladder. In that sense, women scholars like her “shared with illiterate women a common background – a childhood education grounded in signs and symbols that limited their role as “women scholars.”¹⁰

Although the ending by Liang Desheng was a happy one, that was probably not what Chen Duansheng had in mind. She started writing this Tanci when she was 18 and wrote 16 volumes in 3 years and then suspended it on the deaths of her grandfather and mother. 6 years after her marriage, her husband was exiled and she had to take care of the family on her own. For all her difficulty and loneliness, she managed to write the 17th volume. Even in such an unfavorable situation, she continued exploring the limits that women could push on freedom, equality and achievement. However, she did not live to finish the story; she passed away due to illness. At the end of the 17th volume, Meng Lijun was in a painful dilemma. She did not want to be a concubine of the emperor, although they went on well with each other. And she was not very interested in getting back to marry her fiancé, either. But it was also impossible for her to continue serving as the prime minister. Talented as she was, she could not work out the questions like “Why must I be a wife? Why can’t I be the prime minister just because I am a woman?” Actually the story could have ended here to imply the absence of solution in reality.

Chen Duansheng was one of the women who excelled in Tanci in Hangzhou (杭州) where such literature prospered in the eighteenth century. The story enjoyed extraordinary popularity, especially among women. According to *Essays on Ladies* (閨媛叢談), “all the women in our country at that time, as long as they were literate, read this book.” Since “women wrote songs they could sing and play in solitude, in the confines of a garden or courtyard”,¹¹ its popularity means to some extent that the story gained many women’s sympathy and fulfilled their subconscious dreams. The happy ending was a compromise of the potentially subversive theme and made the story more acceptable to the general public. There have been novel, song and various theater genre adaptations of this work. Up to today it is still a classic.

Chen Duansheng was ahead of her time in presenting Meng Lijun's symbolic triumph of women over men, which was achieved through bypassing the strict gender segregation and assuming the other gender identity. But after her secret was discovered she was immediately trapped in a dilemma powerless and the optimal choice left for her to make was to take back her orthodox role as wife. This paradox of Meng Lijun as well as that of Chen Duansheng illustrates the situation of the literarily educated women in Qing: since their education was to a domestic end, they could at most exert some influence over the male members of their families. They could never go over the walls of their household and make their presence directly felt in the men-dominated political mechanism.

Notes

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7. Ditto, P. 22
8. Chen Yinke, P. 168
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10. Ditto, P.27
11. Ditto, P.23