Journal of Chinese History (2025), **9**, 34–61
doi:10.1017/jch.2023.15

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mystery and History: Revisiting "A Letter to My Husband" by Yunzhen

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(Received 8 December 2022; revised 30 March 2023; accepted 17 April 2023)

Abstract
In the late 18th century, the discovery of "A Letter to My Husband" (Jiwai shu), attributed to a woman named Yunzhen, caused great excitement in Beijing. Focusing on the question of how the mysterious letter captured the imagination of the literati, this article employs the strategy of contextualized reading to tease out social and cultural milieus and the textures of sentimentality of its readers. It suggests that the letter's resonating power rests on its dual nature: a self-expression of a talented and exemplary wife and a chronicle of the time when the entanglement of female talent, wifely virtue, marital love, and family tension became integral to the lives of the literati.

Keywords: gender; female writer; Qing dynasty; history; marriage; family

In the late eighteenth century, the capital of Beijing was said to have been caught up in a great excitement. The discovery of "A Letter to My Husband" (*Jiwai shu* 寄外書) "nearly drove the price of paper up" thanks to demand from readers eager to make copies.[1] The trope "driving the price of paper up" refers to the Jin dynasty sensation when Zuo Si 左思 (250–302) published his masterpiece "The Rhapsody of Three Capitals" (*Sandu fu* 三都賦) in Luoyang, its capital.[2] Although the comparison may be embellished, it speaks to the unusual reception the letter received. The literati response was all the more extraordinary considering the letter's authorship: it was attributed to a woman named Yunzhen 雲貞 (or Chen Yunzhen 陳雲貞) about whom little was known.

The immense appeal of the Yunzhen letter (and the six poems attached to it) is further testified to by its inclusion in an array of anthologies of women's writings over the subsequent centuries, among them *Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji* 國朝閨秀正始集,

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Two draft versions of this article were presented at the 2006 conference "Traditional Chinese Women Through a Modern Lens" held at Harvard University and at the 2022 annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, and I am grateful for the helpful feedback I received from both events. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Chinese History* for their thoughtful comments.

[1] Yu Jiao 俞蛟, *Meng'an zazhu* 夢厂雜著 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), 41.

[2] Fang Xuanlin 房玄齡, et al., *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 2377.

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Shisan mingyuan shicao 十三名媛詩草, *Guimo cuizhen* 閨墨粹珍, and *Nǚzi guwen guang zhi* 女子古文觀止. References to the letter are also scattered across Qing miscellaneous notes (*biji* 筆記) and personal memoirs.[3]

By the early 1960s, the Qing-era adoration had long faded, but the letter would once again make a splash. The renewed interest was sparked by Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1890–1969), arguably the most revered historian of twentieth-century China. In his study of the life of the female writer Chen Duansheng 陳端生 (1751–?), he speculated that "the talented woman of the Qianlong era (Chen Yunzhen) might be Chen Duansheng." He only abandoned his hypothesis after spending a great deal of effort "searching and investigating evidence."[4] Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), the poet turned scholar and bureaucrat, however, was determined to succeed where Chen Yingke had failed. From May 1961 to January 1962, Guo and the skeptics of the theory wrote back and forth in the academic sections of two major newspapers, the *Guangming Daily* and *Wenhui Daily*, debating whether Yunzhen was Chen Duansheng. In the end, Guo fell short of proving that Yunzhen was indeed Chen Duansheng, but the debate proved to be highly productive in a different way: a trove of materials emerged as a result of the debate that not only revealed the distinction the letter had once enjoyed but also the many inconsistencies in its contents and in Qing sources, raising questions about the letter's authenticity.

The Yunzhen story is by no means an isolated incident in late imperial China. It in fact belongs to a tradition in which literary works (predominantly poems) authored by women of obscure or unknown identity found a widely enthusiastic audience. Du Fangqin, Paul Ropp, and Grace Fong, for example, have written extensively about the mysterious Shuangqing 雙卿 (or He Shuangqing 賀雙卿), a young eighteenth-century wife from a village in Jintan 金壇 county, Jiangsu. Despite her humble background, Shuangqing excelled in *ci* poetry (song lyric). She suffered terrible abuse at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law,[5] yet she was able to interact through her poems with a group of male poets who admired her, among them Shi Zhenlin 史震林 (1693–ca. 1779), the author of *Random Notes from Xiqing* (*Xiqing san ji* 西青散記) in which her story was told.[6] A more comparable case to Yunzhen's is perhaps *tibishi* 題壁詩 (poems written on the wall). As noted in a number of studies, the age-old practice took on new features during the Ming–Qing transition: the authorship of the mid-seventeenth-century *tibishi*—written on walls of inns, courier stations, and temples—was often obscure, and "an overwhelming proportion" of these poems were (or claimed to be) by distressed female travelers.[7] The poems provoked intense emotional response from readers who took pains to record and circulate them, with some going so far as to compose matching verses.[8]

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[3] In 1961 scholar Bai Jian 白堅 wrote that he had read and memorized the poems attached to the Yunzhen letter when he was a child and that he knew the same author had written a renowned letter. Bai, "Chen Yunzhen jiqi 'Jiwai Shu'" 陳雲貞及其寄外書, *Guangming Daily*, August 15, 1961.

[4] Chen Yinke, *Hanliutang ji* 寒柳堂集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), 45.

[5] Du Fangqin 杜芳琴 has compiled a collection of Shuangqing's poems titled *He Shuangqing ji* (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1993) and has also written a biography of Shuangqing, *Tong ju naihe shuang: Shuangqing zhuan* 痛菊柰何霜: 雙卿傳 (Shijiazhuang: Huanshan wenyi chubanshe, 1999). Paul Ropp has authored a monograph, *Banished Immortal: Searching for Shuangqing, China's Peasant Woman Poet* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). Du and Ropp travelled together to Jiangsu province to investigate the historical sites where Shuangqing lived. However, they hold different views on whether Shuangqing was a real historical figure. Pointing to the unique voice and the quality of the poems, Du believes they could not possibly be forged; Ropp on the other hand believes the poems were created by Shi Zhenlin himself, the man who introduced Shuangqing to the world in his *Random Notes from Xiqing*. For Grace Fong's work on Shuangqing, see "De/Constructing a Feminine Ideal in the Eighteenth Century: Random Records of West-Green and the Story of Shuangqing," in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, edited by Ellen Widmer and Kang-I Sun Chang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 264–81; and "Engendering the Lyric: Her Image and Voice in Song," in *Voices of the Song Lyric in China*, edited by Pauline Yu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 107–44.

[6] See Du, *Tong ju naihe Shuang*, and Ropp, *Banished Immortal.*

In both the *tibishi* and the Shuangqing cases, the women's biographical information was either unknown or fragmentary.[9] Victimhood was part of the identity of the itinerant women, as sadness and despair characterized the voices they left behind. One of the widely circulated *tibishi* was by "A Girl from Kuaiji" (Kuaiji nǚzi 會稽女子). Readers learn from the short preface to the poem that she was married as a concubine to a merchant whose wife was so cruel that she intended to end her life.[10] Whereas this tragic story was set in an abusive polygynous family, a far greater number of *tibishi* were written by women taken captive or killed during the brutal Manchu conquest. Lamenting on their suffering, these women also declared heroically their commitment to sexual purity in the face of dislocation and violence.[11] While the anonymous poems were uniformly praised, their authorship was subject to interpretation. Some historians are convinced of the reliability of most of these poems, but others argue that they were likely forgeries by men.[12]

Although issues regarding authenticity and authorship intrigue historians, studies of such cases largely focus on different kinds of questions. Deciphering the cases through the lens of social and cultural change and interpreting their meanings in specific time and space, historians ask what they could reveal about the underlying social and cultural landscape and emotions and psychologies of both the creators (the obscure women authors) and the promoters (the literati men and women) of these poems. For example, Grace Fong frames her analysis of the Shuangqing story around gender representations, and argues that the image of Shuangqin was (re)constructed by her male admirers on the feminine ideal of *jiaren* 佳人—the beautiful women who was talented, sensible, virtuous, and yet ill-fated.[13] Dorothy Ko draws connection between *tibishi* and women's roles in the historical rise of the cult of chastity while suggesting that the literati interest in these works was also tied to a "'connoisseurship of women' fueled by a thriving commercial press."[14] Zeitlin notes that the popularity of a story such as "A Girl from Kauiji" lies in its power to resonate with readers who "identified with the heroine and read their own fates allegorically into her history," but more generally, the literati zeal of collecting women's *tibishi* had to do with their fear of the vanishing of women's writings in the destructive Ming–Qing transition.[15] These discussions make crystal clear the value of these cases for historical study: they offer an distinctive vantage point to observe ideas about gender, social and cultural milieus, and literati sentimentality at a particular moment in time.

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[7] Judith T. Zeitlin, "Disappearing Verses: Writing on Walls and Anxieties of Loss," in *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, edited by Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu with Ellen Widmer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 75. In contrast to the obscurity of authorship in the mid-seventeenth-century, *tibishi* from the Song dynasty, for example, were mostly written by established scholar-officials. Song did have female-authored *tibishi*, but their number was very small. See Cong Zhang, "Communication, Collaboration, and Community: Inn-Wall-Writing during the Song (960–1279)." *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 35 (2005), 1–3.

[8] Dorothy Ko, "The Complicity of Women in the Good Woman Cult," in *Family Process and Political Process in Modern Chinese History* vol. I. (Taipei: Academia Sinica, Institute of Modern History, 1992), 462; Zeitlin, "Disappearing Verses."

[9] Some *tibishi* included a preface that contained a sketch of their background.

[10] Zeitlin, "Disappearing Verses," 92.

[11] Ko, "The Complicity of Women," 463.

[12] For example, Dorothy Ko points to the verifiability of the specific records about the anonymous poems as a strong indication of their authenticity; Wai-yee Li, on the other hand, argues that the image of the victimized women these poems constructed served as a "fictive or allegorical mask" for male poets. Li, "Heroic Transformations: Women and National Trauma in Early Qing Literature," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 59.2 (1999), 423.

[13] Fong, "De/Constructing a Feminine Ideal," 273.

Following the lead of these studies, this article is organized around two sets of issues. It begins by revisiting old questions concerning the Yunzhen letter's authorship and authenticity. The problems warrant our attention not only because they once sparked a heated debate and remain a key piece of the puzzle regarding the letter, but also because, in this case, the available sources present us with a rare opportunity to put forward a hypothesis about how the mysterious letter might have taken shape. The main interest of the article, however, is to seek an understanding of the social and cultural environments and psychological textures that underlay the letter's historical appeal. How did the letter capture the imagination of the literati of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so deeply? Where did the emotional connections lie between the letter and its readers, and what did that literati sentimentality indicate about the cultural changes and social conditions? The Yunzhen letter's huge popularity was due in part to its exceptional literary quality. The letter is composed of a detailed and lucid narrative that amounts to a self-articulated life story, making it a great piece of reading. Here the genre may have played a part as well. The letter was a ubiquitous form of conjugal communication in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries amid widespread conjugal separation, but unlike conjugal poems, conjugal letters were seldom made public.[16] The Yunzhen letter is a rarity. It would have satisfied the Qing reading public's craving for a new form of cultural consumption. However, it is highly unlikely that the letter's literary form or quality alone was enough to provoke the kind of response the letter received; its power to connect with its readers essentially rests on the story it tells.

The discussion that follows employs the strategy of what I call "cross reading," that is, a close reading of the letter in conjunction with contemporary sources, as a way of locating the points of intersection between the Yunzhen story and readers' response. What that reading reveals is that the letter's major themes widely reverberate through contemporary records, suggesting that the story was hardly one person's experience but captured the experiences and sentiments of many women and men from similar social and economic backgrounds. The emotional connections were multi-layered, but in essence, they revolved around the challenges that literati women confronted during the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

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[14] Ko, "The Complicity of Women," 464–65.

[15] Zeitlin, "Disappearing Verse," 107.

[16] The rarity of published conjugal letters can be inferred from *Nǚzi shuxin* 女子書信 (Letters by women), a manuscript composed by the twentieth-century scholar Hu Wenkai 胡文楷 (housed in Shanghai tushuguan). The fifth volume of the manuscript contains eighty-six works from the Qing period, of which only twelve were from wife to husband. It is unclear, however, if all the twelve letters, most of which appear to be excerpts, were authentic. For a discussion on the conjugal letter's sentimental meanings, see Weijing Lu, *Arranged Companions: Marriage and Intimacy in Qing China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), 169–70.

Readers will recognize in the discussion below some familiar themes about that era: the dazzling display of female literary talent, the commanding managerial role of wife in preserving the family, and the cultural affirmation of marital intimacy and companionship. Woven into the letter's narrative were also other less understood and less upbeat subjects: the breakdown of the fabric of families, the absence of the husband from home, and the abuses and hardships endured by the wife who was left behind. In fact, the unusual revelation of this unsettling and "dark" tale of a literati family may have had the greatest power to elicit strong public response.

In a sense, the Yunzhen letter was, to some extent, a text of self-representation. Writing was a powerful vehicle for women to record their lives, express their emotions, and demonstrate their moral character.[17] As literary scholar Binbin Yang has demonstrated, writing empowered women and helped them gain "fame and social honor"; it was "a path to immortality."[18] Thanks to the letter, the anonymous Yunzhen achieved that "fame" and "immortality." But her letter is distinctive in that, although it originally was intended to be a personal and "private" correspondence, the wide circulation as well as the "makeover" that it very likely received in the process of the circulation effectively transformed it into a "public" text, inscribing on it the collective sentimentality of the literati women and men. The letter, therefore, can be read as a chronicle of the expression and representation of the literary public of its time, a time when the entanglement of female talent, wifely virtue, marital love, and family tension became integral to the lives of the social elite.

The Mystery: Two Origin Stories and the Many Inconsistencies

Contemporary sources point to two versions of the Yunzhen letter's origin. According to the first, the letter was accidentally discovered in a postal package. Evidential scholar Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820) was among the first to make note of it, writing in the 1790s:

> The husband of the woman named Yunzhen was banished to the frontier for his crimes. She sent him a letter, and a border officer opened it. The letter's words were deep, gentle, and graceful. Zhu Shiyan, the gentleman from Baoying 寶應, wrote a poem to commemorate it—this is telling [of its fine quality]. The letter contains a line "departing at the Maple Pavilion," and [therefore] hearsay has it that Yunzhen was from Xianyou 仙遊 [in Fujian]."[19]

A similar account by Miao Gen 繆艮 (1766–1835) noted that after its discovery by the border officer, the letter was resealed and continued its journey to Yili in the northwestern border region of Xinjiang.[20] Miao included the letter in *Wenzhang youxi chubian* 文章遊戲初編, which he compiled and printed in 1803. It is the earliest extant version of the letter.

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[17] For women's writing as autography and collections of their work as a form of "life history/writing," see Grace S. Fong, *Herself An Author: Gender Agency and Writing in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); for women's writing as strategies of self-representation and self-empowerment, see Binbin Yang, *Heroines of the Qing* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).

[18] Yang, *Heroines of the Qing*, 10.

[19] Jiao Xun, *Diaogu ji* 雕菰集 (Congshu jicheng xianbian edition), 69:59.

[20] Miao Gen, *Wenzhang youxi chubian* (1825 Hongdaotang edition), 3/16b–24b. For a similar account, see Liang Shaoren 梁紹壬, *Liangbanqiuyu'an suibi* 兩般秋雨庵隨筆 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982), 415.

Whereas the first version holds that the letter was accidentally discovered in a package, the second version, which appeared later than the first, claimed it was intentionally released by a friend of Yunzhen's husband. Yu Jiao 俞蛟 (1751–?) described it in his *Meng'an zazhu* 夢厂雜著:

> Fan Qiutang 范秋塘 was a *zhusheng* from Huai'nan and lost his mother while young. He was unrestrained in his manner and conceited because of his talents. His stepmother by a certain surname was a shrew, and Qiutang could not fulfill his sonly duties. She accused him of being disobedient and took him to the authorities. Qiutang was exiled to Yili. His wife, Yunzhen, was virtuous and talented. She was skilled at writing and excelled at poetry. She often sent letters from thousands of miles away, writing or replying to Qiutang. [Yu] Shihe 于時和, nephew of the prime minister of Jintan [i.e. Yu Minzhong 于敏中], was in the same exile place, and the two paid visits to each other frequently. Qiutang often showed him the letters. Shihe sighed in admiration, copied the letters, and stored them at the bottom of his chest. He came to the capital after receiving an imperial pardon and showed the letters to his colleagues. The letter was more than 400 words long.[21]

This account appears to contain all the vital information. It identified Yunzhen and her husband's hometown (Huai'nan), his name (Fan Qiutang), and the reason for his exile (committing offense against his stepmother). The reliability of this information was, however, impossible to know with the exception of one detail. Yu Shihe, the man who befriended Qiutang and publicized the letter, was a nephew of Yu Minzhong (1714–1780), grand secretary of the Qianlong emperor. He had indeed been sentenced to exile in Yili in 1780 for attempting to appropriate family property after Yu Minzhong's death.[22] The account also has a couple of inconsistencies: Shihe was said to have copied and released all of Yunzhen's letters, yet the account noted that "the letter was more than 400 words long," implying there was only one letter in his possession. Further contradicting himself, Yu Jiao recorded the entire letter in the same account, which has more than two thousand words.

These were not the only discrepancies found in contemporary accounts. For example, in various sources, Yunzhen, whose last name was not disclosed in the letter, was given different surnames including Chen, Shi, Mao, Mou, and Lin;[23] her hometowns varied between Huai'nan or Hai'an in Jiangsu, Xianyou 仙遊 in Fujian, and

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[21] Yu Jiao, *Meng'an zazhu*, 41. For similar accounts, see Zhang Xiangwen 張相文, *Nanyuan conggao* 南園叢稿, in *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan*, compiled by Sheng Yunlong, 1929 reprint (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe,1968), vol. 30, 812–21. Ding Yan, 丁晏 (1794–1875) *Shanyang shizheng* 山陽詩徵 included both versions. Ding, *Shanyang shizheng*, 26/8b.

[22] Yu Minzhong died in 1779 with no surviving son, and his grandson, Deyu, appears to have been adopted. See Guo Moruo, "You guan Chen Duansheng de taolun er san shi" 有關陳端生的討論二三事, *Guangming Daily*, October 5, 1961. Upon Minzhong's death, Yu Shihe plotted with Mingzhong's concubine in an attempt to appropriate his property. Deyu took the issue to the Qianlong emperor, and Shihe was punished with exile to Yili to serve as a laborer in 1780. "Yu Minzhong zhuan" 于敏中傳, in Li Huan 李桓, *Guochao qixian leizhen chubian* 國朝耆獻類徵初编 (Taipei, Mingwen shuju, 1985), 139:87–88; and *Qing shilu* 清實錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 22:16258–59.

[23] "Chen" appeared in Hongdaotang 1825 reprint of the first edition of *Wenzhang youxi chubian*. See Guo Moruo, "Chen Yunzhen 'jiwaishu' zhimi," *Guangming Daily*, June 29, 1961; "Shi" in *Wenzhang youxi chubian* (1824 edition); "Mao" in Liang Zhaoren, *Liangban qiuyu'an suibi*, 415; and "Mou" in Yin Lianzhi, *Ying Lianzhi ji* (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2013), xia ce: 521.

Qiantang 錢塘 in Zhejiang.[24] Some of the inconsistencies, however, could be explained by errors in handwriting or associated with pronunciations. For example, Guo Moruo suspected that two of the surnames, "Mou" 牟 and "Mao" 毛, were derived from the character "mei" 妹 (sister) because of their phonetic similarities. "Mei Yunzhen" 妹雲貞 (sister Yunzhen) are the first three characters of the letter.[25] Along similar lines, I contend that the other two surnames, "Chen" 陳 and "Lin" 林, may have come from incorrect handwriting when copying the character "mei" 妹 because the handwritten character "mei" can look like "chen" or "lin" with just a few minor errors or vague strokes. Similarly, the names of Huai'an 淮安 and Huai'nan 淮南 can be easily confused due to either handwriting or pronunciation.

While these inconsistencies appear to be attributable to errors made during the letter's circulation, other discrepancies—including the varied dates, length of the letter, and the internal achronological details—cannot be so easily explained. The letter that survives today has a little over 2200 words (with slight variation in different sources), but some contemporary sources reported the letter to be several hundred or over 400 words long.[26] This shorter version of the letter, however, does not appear in any extant sources.

The confounding accounts and discrepancies raised questions about the letter's authenticity during the debates of the 1960s. After abandoning the theory that Yunzhen was Chen Duansheng, Guo Moruo declared the letter a total fabrication (although he vaguely acknowledged that the reported "four-hundred words" version might be real) and accused Miao Gen of being behind the forgeries.[27] Other scholars either believed that the letter was authentic and both accounts of the letter's origins could be trusted, or they believed that the earliest and shorter version of the letter was authentic, but the long version was adulterated. Little evidence, however, was provided for these speculations.[28]

Obviously, no firm conclusions can be reached without new evidence, but it is possible to conjecture based on the totality of sources available. First, the claim that the letter was accidentally discovered from a postal package by a border officer, as outlandish as it sounds, may in fact be reliable. At the time of the letter's emergence, local authorities were indeed implementing a policy of inspecting private correspondences at the Jiayu Pass, a key stop on the way to Yili, the destination of Yunzhen's letter. The government practice was described in an epitaph written by Wang Qisun 王芑孫 (1755–1817) for a man in his lineage who served as an inspector there:

> Jiayu was called Yumen in ancient times, and today it is the key pass in Xinjiang. Worried that criminals may escape [through the Pass], high authorities ordered prefectures to issue passports to travelers who headed west of the Pass and have

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[24] "Huai'an was recorded in Ding Yan, *Shanyang shizheng*, 26:4a, and "Qiantang" first appeared in the second edition of *Wenzhang youxin chubian.*

[25] See Guo, "Chen Yunzhen 'Jiwai shu' zhi mi."

[26] Chen Wenshu 陳文述 noted that the letter was "several hundred words long." See "Yunzhen qu" 雲貞曲, in *Yidaotang shi waiji* 頤道堂詩外集 (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 1505:483–84. Yu Jiao described the letter to be "more than four hundred words long," though the version he recorded has over two thousand words. Yu, *Meng'an zazhu*, 41. Two of the attached poems to the Yunzhen letter, One and Six, also indicate that the letter was short.

[27] Guo, "Chen Yunzhen 'Ji Wai Shu' zhi mi."

[28] Bai, "Chen Yunzhen ji qi 'Jiwaishu'"; Jing Tang 敬堂, "Chen Duansheng shi Chen Yunzhen ma" 陳端生是陳雲貞嗎? *Wenhui Daily*, December 16, 1961.

> them verified by border officers. Consequently, some border officers used the policy to harass travelers. They would search travelers' belongings that are as tiny as hair and would put people in prefecture jail even though the small items they carried, such as medicine and tea, were not illegal. [The government] also ordered that private correspondence by soldiers or commoners that were delivered through the pass be opened and inspected by the government. Mr. Wang strongly stated his opinion that the policies were inconvenient [to people]. The practices were thus stopped.[29]

Inspector Wang held his position in the Jiayu Pass for "an extended period of time" until his retirement. He died at the age of 60 in 1794.[30] This would put the 1770s or 80s within the timeframe when the letter-inspection policy was active. The Yunzhen letter was dated 1779.

The probability of this account of the letter's discovery, I believe, does not necessarily discredit the second account. Aside from the verifiability of the identity of Yu Shihe (who brought the letter to light), the letter's two reported lengths—over 2000 words in one and over 400 words in another—may contain a clue. A letter over 2200 words long was out of the norm,[31] but the length would be reasonable if it contained all of the letters that Yu Shihe possessed and later released in Beijing (presumably including the one that had been opened at the Jiayu Pass). The current letter states that Yunzhen sent three or seven letters (depending on the source). If 400 words was roughly the normal length of her letters, then the current "2200" word length roughly equal that of several letters combined. This would not only explain the letter's abnormal length but also other internal contradictions. For instance, at one point the letter states that it had been ten years since her husband's exile only to state later that once his exile reached ten years, he could hope to gain imperial amnesty and return home. At another point, a poem attached to the letter, dated the first day of the twelfth month, described springtime scenes. Obviously, if the letter was written at one time, it would not have contained such contradictions. It is also worth noting that conjugal separations were widespread during the High Qing, but rarely did they involve a husband in exile. It would make no sense to feature a dubious husband if the letter was a forgery.

The Yunzhen letter, therefore, may neither be entirely original nor completely fabricated. It is not inconceivable that it was based on real letters written by a woman named Yunzhen. A process of integrating the short letters into a long one, either by a single reader or multiple readers, might have taken place in the initial days of the letter's circulation in manuscript form, before being printed as one letter in *Wenzhang youxi chubian*. The letter, which varied only slightly in wording in various Qing sources, is not only exceptionally long, but also has an exquisitely polished style. It reads more like a refined piece of literature than something written in haste, as it claimed. This process would involve not only editing the original but also reimaging or even creating new content to fill gaps and smooth the narrative. It might be this process that reshaped the letter into a kind of "classic" text and its author—Yunzhen—into a cultural icon.

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[29] "Epitaph of Mr. Wang, Inspector of Jiayu pass, Gansu province," in Wang Qisun, *Yuanyatang quanji* 淵雅堂全集 (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 1481:130.

[30] Wang Qisun, "Epitaph of Mr. Wang," 1481:130.

[31] The sample letters that appeared in letter-writing guides of the seventeenth-century, for example, were all less than a hundred words long. See Kathryn Lowry, "Personal Letters in Seventeenth-Century Epistolary Guides," in *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, edited by Susan Mann and Yu-yin Cheng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 160–67. A better indication of the normal length of conjugal letters is the case of Chen Ershi. Chen wrote twenty-seven letters to her husband when he escorted his mother's coffin home and stayed there for about a year. The letters range from a few dozen to several hundred words with the longest having about 650 words.

The Narrative: A Contextualized Reading

> Sister Yunzhen solemnly pulls the lapels of her garment together and bows twice to Brother Qiutang: The time we parted at the Maple Pavilion is still in my memory, yet in a snap of fingers it has been ten years. In the faraway fortress, the sojourner's [i.e. Qiutang's] sorrow has lingered for the years and months that have passed; within the gate of Changmen 長門, the resentment [of the deserted wife] has been felt deeply from countless mornings to evenings.[32] Yet, being with Mother and surrounded by our son and daughter, I have some comfort. But in exile, you are by yourself and your life depends on other people. With whom can you make merry, and who will ask if you are warm or cold or hungry or thirsty? Having no companions, how much lonesomeness must you have suffered! Although my body cannot fly [to your side] from ten thousand miles away to resume the love of one night, the parting soul and broken dreams have often been with me. "Thinking of a person every single hour of the day" and "the worries that makes one feel as if one's intestines are being pulled and twisted"—are these sayings just empty words![33]

This gently sentimental opening paragraph, with a touch of classic reference and poetic imagery, instantly puts on display two central features of the letter: first, the sensibility and caring of a wife enduring a long conjugal separation, and second, her sophisticated literary skills that enabled her to speak eloquently. These qualities are woven seamlessly together, constructing a narrative that is profoundly emotional and yet effortless to read. The features run throughout the letter as Yunzhen describes her arduous life, bringing readers along to feel her sorrow and admire her character.

Keeping up communications during their long years of separation had been difficult, continues Yunzhen. In the years that they were separated, he had sent seven letters, and she had only managed to reply three times: "It is hard to find someone who could deliver a letter, but it is even harder to put down in words all of what I long to express. A word and a sentence—they could not satisfy the eyes earnestly waiting for letters to arrive."[34] This sentiment would certainly resonate with readers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As male sojourning grew more prevalent, many couples had no choice but to endure separations, long or short, and they relied on letters to communicate through those trying times. Couples living in the prosperous parts of the empire wrote to each other approximately once a month.[35] But in Yunzhen's case, her husband's remote location of Yili would have made keeping in contact more difficult. A bigger obstacle was her mother-in-law's surveillance. Sending and receiving letters had to be done in secrecy. The letter detailed one terrifying moment two years earlier when she was almost caught receiving a letter being delivered to her.[36]

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[32] "Changmen" was the name of a palace of the emperor Wudi of the Han dynasty. It became a synonym for an abandoned wife because empress Chen lived in it after she was deserted by Wudi.

[33] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 16a–b. The text being translated in this section does not include the entire letter and, for the sake of organization, the excepts do not strictly follow the orders in which they appear in the letter. The letter, from the 1803 edition of *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, was titled "A Letter to My Husband." Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 16a. As discussed above, the letters in circulation in Qing times vary only slightly in terms of words and sentences.

[34] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 16b.

[35] This estimate is based on a few cases I have come across in my research. During the one-year separation from her husband, Qian Yiji 錢儀吉, Chen Ershi 陳爾士 sent him twenty-seven letters, that is, about

Since sending him the last letter, Yunzhen notes,

> Trees have grown around the new tombs, and the walls are standing firm. Seasonal and festival sacrifices have been offered as usual. The lake's water has been calm and has not flooded the tomb, so you need not worry about it. Mother walks around using a cane and eats and drinks as before. She is a bit low on energy only when afflicted with pneumonia, which has happened from time to time.[37]

It is noteworthy that the letter prioritizes these household matters: the conditions of the family cemetery, the maintenance of ancestral offerings, and the health of a parent-in-law. For an elite household, the ability to continue performing ancestral rites and uphold their filial responsibilities toward the elderly were marks of social distinction. They occupied a special place in household management. As an educated wife well versed in Confucian ritual and moral cannons, Yunzhen understood the importance of these responsibilities.

Things seem to be fine, but what Yunzhe describes next begin to shatter this image of a functional Confucian family.

> Relatives are all like strangers. Your oldest brother-in-law and sister, although not completely indifferent, do not do much to care for us. Your second brother-in-law has died, and second sister still stayed in the capital. The sixth brother-in-law and sister are in Hunan, and there has been little correspondence for a long time. Although elder brother Yingting is harsh and mean, he is someone on whom Mother depends. When you send letters, please always show your gratitude and indebtedness so that hopefully you will not lose [Mother's] affection.
>
> As for the ungrateful person, he has now moved to another place to live. But it is inevitable that, when my guard is relaxed, he will [use those occasions to] suggest to you in ambivalent words my impropriety. What I can only do is to endure and be strong, and to stand firm so that I can fulfill whatever I am responsible for. As for the slander and accusations of impropriety, I cannot control whether you believe them or not.[38]

To summarize, the Fans were an extended family. The father-in-law, not mentioned, was presumably deceased. Qiutang had a large number of siblings, all married and some had moved away. Whether near or far, they were barely in touch. An elder

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two letters per month on average. Chen Ershi, *Tingsonglou yigao* 聽松樓遺稿, in *Jiangnan nǚxing bieji*, edited by Hu Xiaoming and Peng Guozhong (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2008), chubian shang, 599–614; When Jin Liyin died, it was discovered that she had kept a little over 100 letters from her husband, Wang Tan. They were separated intermittently for six or seven years, which means he sent her close to twenty letters a year. Wang Tan 王曇, Yanxiawangulou wenji 煙霞萬古樓文集 (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 1483:592. In another case, Li Xingyuan (1797–1851) received several letters each month from his wife. Li Xingyuan 李星沅, *Li Wengonggong wenji* 李文恭公文集 (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 1525:197.

[36] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 16–17a.

[37] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 17a.

[38] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 17a–b.

brother, who was "harsh and mean," has the trust of the mother-in-law. Later in the letter, Yunzhen mentioned a fourth sister who sent her poems and made enquiries, but she predicted the relationship would "grow distant" as time passed.[39]

If nearly all of their relatives were indifferent, one "ungrateful person" was downright evil. The man's identity was not specified. Judging by his ability to spy on Yunzhen and slander her to Qiutang, he must be another close relative, possibly a brother of Qiutang to whom the couple had generously given assistance in the past. It is implied that the vicious attack against her was of a sexual nature. This kind of attack might not have been unusual in troubled elite families. A wife in her prime living alone makes an easy target for sexual smears.[40] Infidelity for women stood as the most serious breaches of Confucian gender norms. But the elite rarely spoke about such scandals in their own households, let alone the vulnerable women themselves.[41] A private letter was one place where a victim could voice her indignation. But Yunzhen did not want to be seen just as a victim. Her dignity came through in her declaration that he should decide for himself whether he believed it or not; she did not feel the need to defend herself.

Yunzhen had little faith in the goodwill of her relatives. The ill-feelings and mistrust were laid bare again when the family's financial strains come into focus,

> There is no place to get even one grain of rice or a string of silk. Mother has managed the family affairs, and a year's income is not enough for its expenses. I frequently pleaded with her to pawn or sell things, but she was reluctant to give them up, leaving [the household items] only to be embezzled and exploited. As a result, the house is half deserted, and more than half of the rooms are also collapsing. Moreover, [some places] have been taken by the ungrateful person as his own and taken down, except for a few desolate rooms to shield the elements. With shattered bricks and broken tiles, it looks very different from the old days. Those who we would go to for help at times of need have all stopped coming. I also do not casually ask for help when there is a need or emergency for fear that not only might I not get the help needed but also might become their laughingstock.[42]

The household was scrambling to stay afloat. Challenging times called for sacrifices and contributions by all members, but everyone seemed to care only about themselves and grab what was left. As the family descended into disarray, even the servants had become "unruly." They "only know to please those above them and plot to enrich themselves" or to "'dig secrets and spread rumors."[43]

This bleak picture reveals an extended family in decline in which the bonds among its members have been shattered. Brotherly love, one of the five cardinal human relationships and the main pillar sustaining the extended family, was barely observable in the ways the Fans conducted themselves. Qing readers would not be surprised to read such bleak accounts. The deterioration of relationships between brothers was perceived as such a common problem that it was one of the major issues addressed in Qing didactic texts, and devotion to brothers was hailed as a top virtue in male biographies. For a comparable example of tensions between brothers, one needs look no further than the case narrated in *Six Records of a Life Adrift* (*Fusheng liu ji* 浮生六記), a memoir by Shen Fu 沈復 (1763–?), a contemporary of Yunzhen. Shen's younger brother, favored by his parents, was selfish and manipulative. He was responsible in no small part for the rift between their parents and Shen Fu and his beloved wife Yun, which caused the couple to be thrown out of the family twice. The brother even attempted to conceal the news of their father's death, and he effectively barred Shen Fu from receiving his inheritance when Shen was in utter financial disarray.[44] It should also be noted that Qing moral discourse perpetuated the idea that wives were the main source of family disharmony. A loving husband–wife relationship posed an inevitable threat to brotherly bonds, the backbone of an ideal Confucian family. In the High Qing, this sense of threat intensified, as marital bonds were widely recognized and celebrated among the literati. But for sympathetic Qing readers, the letter offered something else that they did not ordinarily hear: a virtuous wife telling her side of the story and exposing the ugly behaviors of the husband's relatives who normally seized the moral high ground.

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[39] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 17b; 19a–b.

[40] An actual case involving accusations of infidelity on the part of an elite wife whose husband was away that ended in a messy lawsuit with political repercussions is studied by Janet Thesis. See Thesis, "Love in a Confucian Climate: The Perils of Intimacy in Eighteenth-Century China." *Nan Nǚ: Men, Women and Gender in China* 11 (2009), 197–233.

[41] Stories of adulteries appeared occasionally in miscellaneous notes (*biji*).

[42] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 19a.

[43] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 20b.

As her relationships with her husband's relatives deteriorated, Yunzhen's own financial woes deepened as she tried to provide for their two children and a maid:

> Recently, besides the two meals, I cannot even spend a little freely. The trunk that I brought with me to our marriage and my dowry items gradually went to the pawn shop. For these years, my patched clothes, [maid] Lianjie's expenses, [son] Dinglang's study costs and tuitions, Daughter Qiong's jewelry and shoes have all been supplied by "cutting a piece of flesh to mend a wound."[45]

Clothes, women's ornaments, and the cost for her son's education made up the bulk of the expenses (from elsewhere in the letter we learn that Yunzhen hired teachers for her son). Having a husband in exile, Yunzhen alone was responsible for coming up with money to get by. "Cutting a piece of flesh to mend a wound" was a metaphor for taking an extreme measure to solve an urgent problem with no consideration for consequences. Yunzhen had to pawn her dowry items to make ends meet. This would be a familiar story to many wives in elite households who also had rely on their dowries to help sustain their marital families when times were hard.[46]

Estranged relations with relatives and financial constraints, however, were not the worst problems that Yunzhen endured. She also had a cruel mother-in-law, of whom she wrote,

> I do not dare to be absent even occasionally in paying my respect and attending to her needs in bed. I am afraid that I would be blamed even if I keep a pleasant look and speak softly. When it comes to food and clothing, if I am frugal, I am regarded as stingy, but if I spend money, I am criticized for being lavish; if I wear plain

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[44] See Shen Fu, *Six Records of a Life Adrift*, translated by Graham Sanders (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011), chap. 3.

[45] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 19b.

[46] For dowry as a key economic resource at woman's disposal, see Susan Mann, "Dowry Wealth and Wifely Virtue in Mid-Qing Gentry Households." *Late Imperial China* 29.1 Supplement (2008), 64–76.

> clothing, I am said to be crude and ugly, but if I wear something bright, I will be accused of being flirtatious. When I am not cursed, I am beaten. I can't even have a full day without being struck. I am over thirty-years old, and it is not like when I was young. All this is seen by my children and other family members. How can I keep my face?[47]

An unreasonable and cruel mother-in-law comes to life in these descriptions. Misuse of the authority of a mother-in-law was not unexpected, but the degree of abuse in this case exceeded what would have been considered normal for a difficult mother-in-law. Here, Yunzhen exposes another problem that was well concealed in elite households. In biographies, incidences of horrific abuse, both physical and mental, at the hands of a mother-in-law were often glossed over by using vague terms such as "stern" and "strict" to describe the mother-in-law. Only occasionally did stories of severe abuse of daughters-in-law surface in Qing records. Young daughters-in-law were most vulnerable to abuse, but older age did not necessarily provide protection. Lady Gao, the mother-in-law of Zhu Yun 朱筠 (1729–1781), the famed mid-eighteenth century patron of evidential scholars, happened to be such an unfortunate daughter-in-law. Gao's mother-in-law was extremely fond of one of her daughter's sons, who at the time was being tutored by her son Wang (lady Gao's husband). At one point, Wang attempted to discipline the boy. Although the physical discipline was not carried out, the old lady was so outraged that she refused to eat. Too frightened to beg his mother for forgiveness, Wang sent his wife instead. Still angry, the old woman slapped lady Gao on the face, but Lady Gao didn't dare to leave until the old lady took a few bites of the meal. The latter finally resumed eating after her daughter (the boy's mother) came to plead with her on her brother's behalf. The incident took place when lady Gao was fifty years of age.[48]

A mother-in-law needed no justification to wield her power. Still, in Yunzhen's case, her husband's relationship with her mother-in-law might have also played a part. Some Qing sources suggest that the old woman was Qiutang's stepmother and that it was she who reported him for the unfilial behavior that led to his exile. This accusation might have been derived from the letter itself where it describes that the mother-in-law "takes pity of him" when Qiutang expresses "shame and regret." If this was indeed the case, then Qiutang would have committed a crime called "being unfilial" (buxiao 不孝), which was one of the Ten Crimes, or *shie* 十惡, in Qing law.[49] The law states that complaints about "being unfilial" should be filed by the grandparents or parents (grand parents-in-law or parents-in-law in cases where a daughter-in-law was the accused). If the grandparents or parents pleaded to have the offender exiled, then he/she would be exiled to a "miasmal place" for military service immediately; if they did not want the offender to be exiled, he/she would receive one hundred lashes according to the clause regarding "the violation of the instructions [of grandparents and parents]." If a stepmother was the plaintiff, an investigation would be carried out, and neighbors and relatives would be summoned to verify the complaint, but there was no difference in penalty whether a son offended his own mother or a stepmother.[50] In Qiutang's case, it would appear that the stepmother (or mother) had chosen to punish him with the worse of the two punishments.

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[47] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 19b–20a.

[48] Zhu Yun, *Sihe wenji* 笥河文集 (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 1440:249–50.

[49] Offences under "unfiliality" included accusing or cursing grandparents, parents, or ones husband's grandparents or parents before an authority; setting up a separate household and keeping separate property when one's grandparents or parents are alive, or failing to provide sufficient care for them; holding a wedding, playing music, or taking off mourning garments to wear normal clothing during the mourning period for parents; concealing the deaths of grandparents and parents and failing to observe mourning rites; and falsely claiming the death of one's grandparents or parents. Ma Jianshi 马建石 and Yang Yutang 杨育棠, *Da Qing lüli tongkao jiaozhu* 大清律例通考校注 (Beijing: Zhongguo zhengfa daxue chubanshe, 1992), 205.

The image of the heartless stepmother had a long history.[51] In the Qing, the literati wary of the destructive power of a malicious stepmother stemmed also from real-life cases in their own time. A widely known tragedy in the eighteenth century involved a stepmother and a talented couple, Cui Mo 崔谟 and his wife Xu Quan 許權. Xu was a well-educated prodigy who also excelled in embroidery. The marriage was a "perfect match," both wife and husband enjoyed writing poetry. Cui, who would gain the prestigious *jinshi* degree in 1742 after Xu's death, did not have a good relationship with his stepmother and stepbrother. Consequently, Xu also fell victim to their relentless abuse, including being cursed viciously day after day. She ended her life by hanging at the age of thirty-two, leaving behind three sons.[52]

In Yunzhen's case, writing to her husband gave her one outlet for expressing her misery and despair. Remembering the happy times, Yunzhen was overwhelmed with sadness:

> When we got married, brushes and ink were like our life. Holding the writing brush and playing the flute, for almost ten years, you sang and I harmonized. Ever since the stem was broken and flowers of Bitter Fleabane drifted [*gen duan peng piao* 梗斷蓬飄, metaphors of separation], I cannot bear to look back on those bygone days. The sound of flute and the traces of ink have long been deserted. Even when I was asked (by you) to write a harmonizing piece, I did it reluctantly. I absolutely do not dare to write poetry that "sings of the wind and toys with the moon." Looking at my own shadow and feeling self-pity, I weep and am overcome by sorrow.[53]

Here, what is most noteworthy was how Yunzhen presents her happiest memory. She framed it entirely in the mode of conjugal intellectual and artistic companionship. The harmonious marriage, called "perfect match" at the time, was symbolized by the sound of the flute and the activity of writing. "Singing and harmonizing" (*changhe* 倡和), a form of poetry composition, had by Yunzhen's time become an iconic representation of ideal marital relationships forged around shared intellectual interests. Having gained traction in the seventeenth century, the new marital ideal swept the literati world in the eighteenth century.[54] Yunzhen obviously subscribed to this ideal. She was one of many women of her time who found great satisfaction in this new type of marriage, but the memory of those fleeting moments of marital joy only heightened her feelings of misfortune.

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[50] See cases in Zhu Qingqi 祝庆祺, *Xing an huilan san bian* 刑案汇览三编 (Beijing Guji chubanshe, 2004), 1837, 1833.

[51] Two of the most widely known stories in premodern China portrayed an evil stepmother. One was the stepmother of the sagely king Shun. Pressured by Shun's stepmother and her biological son, Shun's father attempted many times to kill him. Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 34. Another story was featured in the popular "Twenty-four Stories of Filial Piety" and depicted Min Ziqian 閔子騫, a disciple of Confucius. Min's stepmother made warm winter coats for her biological sons, but the coat she made for Ziqian used reed flower. However, Min objected when his father found this out and wanted to send the stepmother away, saying that if she stayed, only one son would suffer from cold, and if she left, all three sons would do so.

[52] Cui Mo, *Guanyuan yushi* 灌園餘事 (Siku jinhui shu congkan bubian edition), 89:747.

[53] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 20a.

Misfortune struck on many fronts. While dealing with troubles at her marital home, Yunzhen was also confronted with tragedies in her natal family, where she was an only child. She describes that after becoming ill for several months, her widowed mother had recently died. Her mother had apparently adopted an heir to carry on the family line,[55] but the man had taken total control over the family, acted indifferently toward Yunzhen, and was squandering the family's fortunes. "What a detestable man!" exclaimed Yunzhen. It was painful for a daughter to see the adopted "brother" destroying rather than preserving her natal family. Daughters, as studies have shown, rarely relinquish their connections with their natal family even though their main responsibilities were transferred to their marital family after marriage, and they continued to count on support, emotional and sometimes financial, from their parents.[56] Yunzhen remarked that her financial situation had become worse after her mother's death, which seems to imply her mother had helped her.

Of all Yunzhen's misfortunes while her husband was away, the most devastating was losing her daughter Qiong, a sweet fifteen-year old who was her comfort in life:

> All in all, when daughter Qiong was alive, I was able to relieve my sorrow. Sadly, she died from smallpox in the eighth month of last year. The hardships of the separation and raising her for fifteen years are all like water flowing east. I hastily had a coffin made and buried her on the side of the cemetery. I still remember the eve of her death, when she held my cheek, cried sadly, and said, "It has been a long time since Father left home. If I die, please don't send a letter to inform him."[57]

The tragedy would have been familiar to many readers. Losing a child was a nightmare many Qing readers experienced. For the elite class, the death of children commonly occurred because of illness (rather than starvation), and the smallpox pandemic was a major culprit. When the pandemic struck, parents were powerless to protect their young. Losing more than one child was not unusual, and in an extremely horrific case, the eminent evidential scholar Wang Mingsheng 王鳴盛 (1722–1797) lost a total of five children in just ten days.[58]

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[54] Lu, *Arranged Companions*, 59–68.

[55] It was implied in the letter that Yunzhen was her parents' only child and this "brother" of Yunzhen's was not born to her mother. Rather than pass family properties to a daughter, a widow in Ming and Qing times with no living son was legally required to adopt an heir from among her husband's closest patrilineal relatives who would inherit the family property. Kathryn Bernhardt, *Women and Property in China, 960–1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 62–65.

[56] See Beverly Bossler, "'A Daughter Is A Daughter All Her Life': Affinal Relations and Women's Networks in Song and Late Imperial China." *Late Imperial China* 21.1 (2000), 77–106; Weijing Lu, "'A Pearl in the Palm': A Forgotten Symbol of the Father-Daughter Bond." *Late Imperial China* 31.1 (2010), 62–97. Also see Martin W. Huang, *Intimate Memory: Gender and Mourning in Late Imperial China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 157–75.

[57] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 17b–18a.

[58] Wang Mingsheng, *Xizhuang shi cun gao* 西莊始存稿 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 1434:334.

Death of a child was heartbreaking under any circumstances, but it was particularly difficult if it occurred when the mother herself was all alone and besieged by hardships. Thanks to the prevalence of male sojourning, this was not a rare occurrence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yunzhen may have found solace in her remaining child, Dinglang. However, she discloses little emotional closeness when speaking about him. Responding to her husband's inquiry, she focuses entirely on his schooling: She personally taught Dinglang until he reached thirteen, teaching him "the classics, ancient prose, *Shiji* 史記, *Wenxuan* 文選, Tang poetry, *Zhuangzi*, *Xunzi*, and so forth." Afterwards, he studied with teachers, learning to write examination essays, while Yunzhen continued to supervise him personally on poetry writing. Meanwhile, the mother-in-law spoiled the boy, leaving Yunzhen feeling powerless to intervene.[59]

The broad list of books Yunzhen detailed in the letter reveals not just the extent of the educational regimen for teenage boys in elite families but also the huge importance of learned wives to their sons' studies, particularly if their husbands were not around. Women were not simply teaching elementary literacy. During this era of "talented women" (*cai nǘ*), those who were highly educated were capable of doing much more. They played a key role helping to lay the foundation for their sons' classical and literary training. Chen Ershi 陳爾士 (1785–1821), a high-minded poet, was similarly deeply involved in the studies of her teenage son (born to a concubine) Ying when her husband was away. In a letter to her husband 錢儀吉 (1783–1850), she evaluated Ying's performance stating that he was quite familiar with *Yijing* 易經, *Shangshu* 尚書, *Shijing* 詩經, *Zhouguan* 周官, *Yili* 儀禮, the first half of *Liji* 禮記, *Erya* 爾雅, and the "Four Books," but he needed to do better with *Zuozhuan* 左傳. She instructed him to read dozens of pages of *Zuozhuan* and review the other books daily. She also gave him a composition topic for practicing writing.[60]

Like Ershi, Yunzhen strictly supervised and taught her son, but she was critical of his academic performance and skeptical about his future:

> Dinglang is like his father in his studies; he counts on his brightness, but is short on concentration. He has a habit of thinking high and broad, but he doesn't care about appreciating and understanding texts carefully. The poems that he writes are refreshing and unique, but his examination essays are impure. He can gain a lower degree of *shengyuan* but is not material for a government official.[61]

This assessment must have been a profound disappointment for Yunzhen. In his search for evidence proving the letter's forgery, Guo Moruo found Yunzhen's blunt verdict unmotherly.[62] But Yunzhen's attitude was not out of the norm. Qing mothers could be frank when speaking about their sons' lack of progress and did not hold back their disappointment.[63] In this case, Yunzhen was also probably trying to discourage her husband from holding unrealistic expectations. Most notable here, though, is the literary authority that Yunzhen assumed by passing judgement on such a matter that was usually in a husband's purview; she was confident enough to cross into that male terrain.

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[59] This long and ranging list of books was questioned by Guo Moruo who thought it could not possibly be realistic for a teenage boy and therefore considered it as evidence of the letter's forgery. Guo, "Chen Yunzhen 'Ji Wai Shu' zhi mi." While the list might have been inflated during the process of the letter's circulation, it was not entirely unrealistic, as we see from Chen Ershi's teenage son's case.

[60] Chen Ershi, *Tingsongluo yigao*, 601.

[61] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 18a.

[62] Guo, "Chen Yunzhen 'jiwaishu' zhimi."

[63] For example, one mother bluntly told her son who had just earned a zhusheng degree that his achievement did not make her happy because the degree, lowest of the three examination degrees, was not prestigious. You Tong 尤侗, *Xitang wenji* 西堂文集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 467. In

Raising her two children while enduring all these challenges, Yunzhen was fortunate to have a loyal helper, Lianjie (Sister Lian). She wrote, "By the bed on a rainy day or the window when the wind blows or when doing the laundry in the cold water or lighting the fire to cook, she shares my happiness and suffering and follows me like my shadow."[64] Lianjie was Yunzhen's personal maid, but later in the letter Yunzhen promised that she would be Qiutang's "peach leaf" (a euphemism for concubine) when he returned home.[65] At least one Qing source reported a set of poems that Lianjie sent to Qiutang as his concubine; apparently, they were forgeries based on this information in the letter.[66]

Qing literati attitudes about men's sexual relations with maids in their households were ambivalent. While some didactic texts advised a wife to "decorate a maid and present her" to her husband if she failed to give birth to a son, others encouraged timely marriages of maids to other men.[67] Qing writers only occasionally acknowledged their sexual relationships with maids,[68] and writings of educated women suggest that a husband's interest in a maid sometimes put them in a predicament if they had little stomach to tolerate it. At such uneasy times, a subtly teasing or poignantly satirizing poem fit the bill for expressing their displeasure.[69] Yunzhen, apparently, was not one of those kinds of "jealous" wives. Perhaps the offering of Lianjie to Qiutang was her way of compensating for the deprivation from sexual pleasure he endured all those years? Or perhaps promoting Lianjie to the status of concubine was her way of rewarding Lianjie for her loyal devotion to her? Either way, this deed would be seen as virtuous by many and earn her much praise.

One thing is clear: Yunzhen was an unselfish wife whose devotion was such that her husband's emotional and sexual needs were always on her mind. She wrote,

> I have been thinking that you are by nature not careful and unrestrained, and you haven't had a chance to show your talent. Moreover, you have experienced this devastation. Once a mistake was made and all hopes were lost, how could you

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another case, the last words a mother uttered on her death bed were disappointment in her son's failure to earn a degree. See Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊, *Pushuting ji* 曝書亭集 (siku quanshu edition), 1318:529.

[64] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 20b.

[65] The term originated in the poem by Wang Xianzhi that was written to comfort his concubine Taoye (lit. "peach leaf"), who was about to cross a river to join him. Guo Maoqian 郭茂倩, comp. *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 664.

[66] The poems were contained in the 1837 edition of *Zhuanlou zhaiyan* 粧樓摘艷. See Guo Moruo, "Zai tang 'Zaishengyuan' de zuozhe Chen Duansheng" 再談再生緣的作者陳端生, *Guangming Daily*, June 8, 1961.

[67] See Chen Que 陳確, "Xinfupu bu" 新婦譜補. In Zhang Fuqing 張福清, comp. *Nǚjie: Funǚ de guifan* 女誡: 婦女的規範 (Beijing: Zhongyan mingzu daxue chubanshe, 1996), 112.

[68] To give a few examples of noted Qing scholars, Shi Runzhang was once interested in a maid, but his wife suggested that he should take a concubine instead; Qu Dajun took his beloved young wife's personal maid immediately after the latter's death; and Cheng Jingfang had a daughter whose mother was a maid. See Shi Runzhang 施潤章, *Shi Yushan xiansheng xueyu wenji* 施愚山先生學餘文集 (Qingdai shiwenji huibian edition) 67:212; Qu Dajun 屈大均, *Qu Dajun quanji* 屈大均全集, edited by Ou Chu and Wang Guichen (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1996), 3:151–52, and Weijing Lu, "Qu Dajun and His Polygynous Relationships." *Mingdai yanjiu* (Taibei) 31 (December 2018), 95; Cheng Jingfang 程景芳, *Mianxingtang wenji* 勉行堂文集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 1433:219.

[69] See Lu, *Arranged Companions*, 151–57.

> be concerned about keeping a lofty reputation? Additionally, you are now living in a strange region with no loved ones in sight. On a moonlit evening or blossom-opening morning or after a good drink or when the candle is finished burning, it is common for a traveler to play a game to kill boredom or to embrace a prostitute to dispel worries. It may happen that a beautiful girl has an abundance of feelings, or a widow understands you. Then, on her part, she takes pity on a talented man, and [on your part] [engaging in sexual pleasure] is a habit of a literatus that you are unable to avoid. Nothing I can do about it. I am overwhelmed by heartfelt sympathy, and how do I dare to mimic the voice of a jealous wife to write to admonish you?[70]

Here, Yunzhen appears to have subscribed to a line of defense for the male penchant for sexual pleasure with young women in the entertainment quarters that argued it was a natural disposition of talented men.[71] In an elaborate style, Yunzhen imagines her husband's misery enduring a life with no emotional or sexual satisfaction, showing appropriately her unselfishness. In presenting herself as an unjealous and sensible wife, Yunzhen turns a somewhat uncomfortable subject into a moment for exhibiting high virtue. However, almost immediately, she tactfully withdraws her endorsement:

> [I mention this] only because I am concerned that your body is not strong, and you are *qing* [love, emotion] crazed. If she whole-heartedly loves you, then it would be all right that you die for *qing*. But I am worrying that those who speak sweet words but whose heart is like a dagger are as cold as ice, and you would end up wasting your useful energy and suffer endless pain. I thought about this and am very worried about you.[72]

In the end, Yunzhen discourages her husband from seeking comfort with these women. She warns him that they are often deceptive and not to be trusted, and that if he fails, he is bound to be hurt badly.

This advice, it turns out, was nearly identical to that offered by poetess Xi Peilan 席佩蘭 (1760–?) to her husband Sun Yuanxiang 孫原湘 (1760–1829). Xi and Sun were one of the iconic "perfect matches" of the Qing, but despite his happy marital relationship, Sun had a difficult time controlling his romantic involvement, real or imagined, with women of the pleasure quarters. He admitted that he felt as if he was trapped in a web of love like the silkworm being bounded by a self-made cocoon.[73] Offering her advice, Peilan made the central point that those women were not trustworthy. She wrote in a poem,

> What is a cause for concern is the untruthful intent [of the woman],
> The insincere cry and laughter.
> Clouds moisturize clothing in a dream,
> Flowers look gorgeous in a mirror.
> Utterly beautiful and most charming,
> but one cannot trust [such a person] with one's heart.

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[70] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 21a.

[71] See, for example, Lu Qi 陸圻 (1614–?), *Xinfu pu* 新婦譜. In Zhang, *Nǚjie: Funǚ de guifan*, 104.

[72] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 21a–b.

[73] Sun Yuanxiang, *Tianzhenge ji* 天真閣集 (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 1488:91.

Like throwing an ant's nest in a big lake,[74]
The water is drained when the nest is lifted up.
Like pulling up the seedling to help the crop grow,
How could one expect an autumn harvest?
An insect flies into the spider's web,
It is tied up by the web's threads.
It is better for it to turn around,
To escape from the restraints, transcendently.
Even a severe illness is curable,
[If] one is not afraid of the medicine that has a strong initial effect.[75]

The woman Sun fell in love with may look "utterly beautifully and most charming," but she was as fake as a flower in a mirror. To pursue this relationship was like "pulling up the seedling to help the crop grow": it was bound to fail. Peilan encouraged her husband to immediately "escape" to save himself from the emotional torture.

It's not incidental that Yunzhen and Peilan offered similar advice to their husbands; the same approach testifies to shared concerns and strategies of talented women of the time who were tackling the problem of a husband's penchant for sexual pleasure. While they were careful to avoid being viewed as jealous, they made clear their expectation that their husbands have nothing to do with women from the entertainment quarters. It appears that, with the cultural ascendance of talented women and spreading affirmation of marital companionship over the course of the Qing, some women became less inclined to compromise when it came to their husbands' extramarital sexual behavior. A century earlier, the poetess Jiang Lan sarcastically told her husband sojourning in Beijing: "If you become depressed staying alone in your lounger, why not enjoy beautiful women in the pleasure quarters?"[76] In her case, she had long ago cast aside her dreams "of growing old together" with him and couldn't care less about what he did.[77] By contrast, Chen Yunlian 陳蘊蓮, a successful nineteenth-century painter, decisively cut-off her relationship with her husband who was involved with woman from the pleasure quarters.[78]

While providing advice on intimate matters may have been a newer trend, Yunzhen also counselled her husband on more conventional issues, domestic and beyond, as wives had done for ages. Not being with her husband—thus having only partial knowledge about the situations on which she must advise—did not deter her from taking on the wife-advisor role. In the letter, she questioned his decision to take a teaching job elsewhere, which he ended after only three months. She was convinced that he would be better off relying on his friend, the Fourth Master. This name, according to some sources, refers to Yu Shizhong, the man who later publicized the Yunzhen letter. Yunzhen wrote,

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[74] This metaphor alludes to *Zhuangzi* 莊子, "Qiushui" 秋水.

[75] Xi Peilan, *Changzhenge ji* 長真閣集, 1891 edition. 3.13a–b.

[76] Susan Mann and Yu-Yin Cheng, eds., *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 228.

[77] Mann and Cheng, *Under Confucian Eyes*, 228.

[78] Chen Yunlian created a set of eight autobiographical paintings, with corresponding poems that explained their themes. This material along with her poetry collection reveal that she was deeply in love with her husband, but the marriage fell apart later on when he was away from home and indulged in sexual pleasure. See Yang, *Heroines of the Qing*, 54–62; Lu, *Arranged Companions*, 129–32.

> But now that you and the Forth Master are like brothers, you can rely on him and make a home. Why did you throw this away to do something else and create a new problem? Not to mention that you left just for a short period and returned. This is what I cannot understand. Living in this world, one should not incur enmity nor should one owe gratitude for favors. Before he expresses his gratitude, he must think through how to repay the debt.[79]

She went on to say that she did not judge the Fourth Master to be a person of high quality but nonetheless decent with "commendable intentions" and that she already made plans to thank him for pulling her husband from "the abyss of misery" and protecting him. In offering advice and presenting a plan, Yunzhen's confidence, acumen, and resourcefulness shine. She spoke not only with care but also with an air of authority, knowing that her husband was incapable of handling these kinds of issues himself. Although far away, she continued to do all she could to look after his wellbeing.

Looking forward to the time of their reunion, Yunzhen was both sad and hopeful. She comforted her husband by saying that, although he was not eligible for imperial pardon the year before, similar chances were still possible in the future, and he could expect to return home within ten years. "Just be at ease under all circumstances and wait patiently," she wrote, "Will there not be the time for the two of us to unite?" The waiting, however, would in fact be extremely hard for her. Yuzhen saw her situation as "no different from the underworld" and even contemplated ending her life, but she found the strength to live on:

> Destiny is like a thread, and it has firmly tied us together. I have no choice but to preserve this body and muddle through my life for the hope to see you again so that all those years of hardship would not count for nothing. At that time, [I hope] the old is still healthy and the young is established, and I can pass to you the huge responsibilities. How happy I would be! Therefore, so long as you are not back, I will not relinquish my duties even for a single day.[80]

Her will could not be crushed, and their future reunion gave her the strength to hold on to life. With this pledge, Yunzhen concluded her letter, overwhelmed by emotions. "My tears stain the paper, and my thoughts fly. I have calculated that when you get the letter and open it, it should be the season of plums blooming.[81] My heart will be as "sour" (i.e. miserable) as the taste of a plum."[82] She composed six poems and attached them to her letter before sending it off to her husband.

The Commentaries: Collective and Gendered Sentimentality

> Of writings by women, nine out of ten were falsely attributed. The rest were either unsophisticated, weak, vulgar, or shallow. Those that amazed their contemporaries and were passed on in history were not even one or two out of ten. The alleged letter of the Qianlong period by the learned woman Yunzhen to her husband is several thousand words in length, richly elegant, and superb both in content and in style. It seems that the letter could not have been written by a ghostwriter

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[79] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 21b–22a.

[80] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 22b–23a.

[81] The plum season is during the fifth month of the lunar calendar.

[82] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 23.a.

> … As for the six *qilü* style poems that are attached to the letter, they are graceful, affective, and refined. Truly, even after reciting them hundreds of times, one will not get tired.[83]

In his lavish praise of the Yunzhen letter, Ying Lianzhi (1867–1926), the late Qing and early Republican reformer, drew a contrast between the excellence of the letter and the "low" quality of works by female writers in general. The gender bias in his critique was to highlight the brilliance of Yunzhen's writing, which in Ying's view shines through in its form and content.

The contextualized "cross reading" of the letter in the previous section illustrates how a wide set of themes might have yielded resonating power with readers. The psychological and emotional connections can be further elucidated when we examine the commentaries (commentary poems included) on the Yunzhen letter. Where the commentators placed their focus and the language and tropes to which the commentary poems alluded shine a light on the ideas, values, and the collective and gendered sentimentality of the Qing reading public.

A quick survey is enough to show that Ying Lianzhi's sentiment about the Yunzhen letter was widely shared among commentators throughout the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. "Superb both in content and in style," the letter triggered absolute amazement. Miao Gen praised it as "having a righteous heart and a bitter rhythm."[84] The letter was passed on to him from a friend, but he believed that it might be heaven's intention to have him distribute it and make it known to the world. He therefore decided to include it in his *Compositions for Amusement*, even though it was not a work for "amusement."[85] Similarly, Yu Jiao commended the letter for "having an air of gentleness and purity" and being "deeply sentimental and sad, as if [the author was] overwhelmed by emotion."[86] Out of his deep sympathy for Yunzhen's talent and her ill-fate, he chose to place it in his book, *Meng'an zazhu*, to "facilitate its dissemination." Liang Shaoren 梁紹壬 (1792–?) called the letter "a truly great family letter," pointing to its exceptional length, eloquent style, and its sorrowful and graceful disposition.[87]

The appeal of the Yunzhen letter, then, rests on the literary talent of its female writer. It was a testament to the power of women's literary achievement and the vibrant culture celebrating it, which rose in the late Ming and persistently grew in scope and influence in the Qing. Yunzhen was, one may argue, a poster child of this enduring culture. But she was not a typical *cainü̆* in one important regard: unlike other women who made a name for their talent, she could not boast of a well-connected father, husband, son, or brother, nor was she related to a famous mentor or established social circles. The mystery of her origin obviously contributed to the appeal of her letter. A woman of obscure origin able to shine in the literati world was an uplifting story.

The letter, however, was far from uplifting in another regard. It in fact provoked strong emotions of "bitterness" and "sadness" across commentators. The admiration for Yunzhen's literary gifts and the sympathy for her ill-fortune were interwoven, and the "sadness" of her life is where the emotional resonance was most deeply felt.

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[83] Ying Lianzhi, *Ying Lianzhi ji*, xia ce: 521.

[84] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 24.a.

[85] Miao, *Wenzhang youxi chubian*, 24.a.

[86] Yu, *Meng'an zazhu*, 41.

[87] Liang, *Liangbang qiuyu an shuibi*, 415.

Yunzhen's life was besieged by many kinds of miseries and misfortunes, but of all her life's challenges, separation from her husband elicited the most sympathy from the Qing literary public. This sentiment is consistently highlighted in commentaries. Jiao Xun, for example, compared the "deep, gentle, and graceful" letter to two poems from *The Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*), "Ru fen" 汝墳 (The banks of the Ru) and "Junzi yu yi" 君子于役 (My lord is on service).[88] Both poems depict conjugal separation from the wife's standpoint. Part of the latter reads,

> My lord is on service; Not a matter of days, nor months.
> Oh, when will he be here again? The fowls are roosting on their perches,
> In sunset, the sheep and cows have all come down.
> My lord is on service; Were I but sure that he gets drink and food![89]

Like Yunzhen, the protagonist longs for the return of her husband. The waiting is endless, but she endures it graciously and continues to perform her responsibilities dutifully (as suggested in the image of flocks of domesticated animals coming home, which, in the meantime, contrasts with the husband faraway). Even as she suffers the pain of separation, she is more concerned about his wellbeing than her own misery.

This motif of a virtuous wife lamenting conjugal separation would evolve in later times into a classic poetic subgenre, *sifu* 思婦 ("a woman thinking of her husband far away"). The "Lyric of Yunzhen" (*Yunzhen qu* 雲貞曲) by Chen Whenshu 陳文述 (1771–1843) is of that tradition. Commending the poem's "sadly moving tune" in the short preface, it begins:[90]

> A shrike flies eastward; a swallow flies westward,[91]
> My husband in exile is in Yili; I reside in the county of Xianyou.
> Flowers are falling by the autumn pavilion,
> Longing for him but unable to see him, my thoughts wander in a fairyland.
> You dream of coming back home and I dream of leaving for you.
> By the southwest tower, a calling crow languishes.
> I remember the time of your departure in front of the tower,
> The faraway moon has since shone over it, night after night.
> It shines on my husband and it shines on me,
> The moonlight must be on your face, and it is on my heart.
> My heart is as pure as the moon,
> The ancient hairpin has fallen to the bottom of a well and the bronze bottle lies deep in a deserted well.[92]

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[88] Jiao, *Diaogu ji*, 69:59.

[89] Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 57–58.

[90] Chen, "Yunzhen qu," 483–84.

[91] This line is appropriated from a poem, "Dong fei bolao ge" 東飛伯勞歌 (A song of a shrike flying eastward) by Xiao Yan 蕭衍 (464–549, emperor Wudi of the Liang dynasty). The image of two birds fly opposite direction symbolizes parting or the separation of lovers.

[92] These allusions, "gu chai" and "tong ping" derive from poems by two Tang posts Zhang Ji 張籍 and Du Fu 杜甫 respectively. The former depicts the fate of a gorgeous ancient hairpin. Although being discovered in a well, it is put in a case because the changed fashion renders it unwearable; the later describes a bronze vase that fell into a palace well during a war that was later discovered. Although it is damaged it is

Assuming a feminine voice, the rest of the lyric continues to employ allusions and tropes to construct an image of Yunzhen as one who languished in the pain of longing. The heavy use of the tropes securely tied Yunzhen to the conventional "*sifu*" tradition, but Chen Wenshu's effort of imagining Yunzhen in terms of the "*sifu*" mode was accomplished at the cost of the individuality of the Yunzhen story, as the lyric largely ignores the core elements of her story that separate it from the "*sifu*" convention.

This poem by the poetess Tan Yinmei's 談印梅 (fl. late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) helps illustrate the point.

How pitiable, [two birds] fly separate ways.
In the remote pass of the Yanzhi mountain,
Ten years of garrison—nothing is more sorrowful than this.
Letters were sent one after another,
Embroidered on brocade, the characters would not decay.[93]
Permanent separation—why on earth did Heaven make this mistake?
Her sorrowful heart is like a hundred knots.
Even if an imperial pardon is issued and the broken mirror is rejoined,
In her mirror, she would have seen her hair turning white.
By the road leading to the Maple Pavilion, the sound of water is like weeping.
Where [in the frontier] did the soul of the poet [i.e. Yunzhen] fly over?
The meddling spring orioles would not stop making noise,
And they scared away the butterfly in her dream.
She thought it over and over,
But could she reveal her sorrow to anyone?
Hiding the letter, not to expose it.
The boundless sorrow soaks the silvery paper,
Every character and every teardrop, all become blood.[94]

In contrast with Chen Wenshu's somewhat conventional depiction of the Yunzhen letter, Tan Yinmei's poem carries a distinctive air of feminine empathy and sensibility. It too employs the "pairing bird" imagery—a symbol of conjugal love—and uses other allusions to highlight the emotional toll brought about by the long separation, but Tan's empathy goes beyond. The "meddling spring orioles" and "hiding the letter" clearly refer to Yunzhen's treatment at the hands of her hostile family members and hint at the troubles and hardships she endured. For Tan, Yunzhen's misery derived not only from the absence of her husband but also from the specific family circumstances under which she lived.

This intimate reading of the Yunzhen letter, evidently, had something to do with the gendered experience of women. A poem by Xue Shaohui's 薛紹徽 (1866–1911), an enthusiastic late Qing reformer, offers another example. Xue was introduced to the

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still valuable. Here the symbolisms seem to place on the misfortune of the talented Yunzhen. See Zhang Ji, "Gu chai tan" 古釵嘆 and Du Fu, "Tong ping" 銅瓶.

[93] This is a reference to the famous palindrome poems that Su Hui wove into brocade and sent to her husband in exile. The story was record in Fang Xuanlin et al., *Jin Shu*, 2523.

[94] Tan Yinmei, "Maipotang: Ti Lin Yunzhen nűshi jiwaishu hou, wei Lin Xiaotong shangshe zuo" 買陂塘: 題林雲貞女史脊外書後為林小桐上舍作, in *Xiaotangluanshi huike baijia guixiu ci* 小檀欒室彙刻百家閨秀詞, compiled by Xu Naichang 徐乃昌 (1986 edition. Harvard-Yenching collection), *Jiuyi xianguan ci*, 2b.

Yunzhen letter through her oldest brother, who copied and passed it to her. Deeply touched, she noted, "Its words are immensely sentimental, as if she were weeping to let out her feelings. Her gentle feelings and virtuous disposition especially move people to tears. I therefore write this at the end of the letter."[95]

> Trivial family matters,
> [described] in a letter as beautiful as jade, as if written with tears and blood.
> In this world, for things between men and women,
> The sadness over parting is the most difficult to speak of.
> Mountains and passes, far away,
> To say nothing of the constant thoughts of ten years!
> A husband in exile, carrying a weapon,
> When is he coming home?
> When managing to get by,
> Even a clever woman would struggle to cook if there is no rice.
> Unpredictable is the flying swan [that delivers the letter].
> Looking at the boundless sky,
> She only sees the drifting clouds forming and disappearing.
> What an intrusive postman! Why did he open her letter?
> As it is being passed along from one to another, who will take pity on her because of a similar situation [*xi xingxing* 惜惺惺]?
> Causing my thoughts to linger.

The opening line, "trivial family matters," set the tone for Xue's commentary. While sympathizing with Yunzhen's long separation from her husband, Xue Shaohui also commiserated with her on the impossible situations she faced in her daily life. Here the term *xi xingxing* is particularly worth noting. Xue made it clear that readers held the Yunzhen letter dear to their heart because they could identify with Yunzhen's life personally. *Xi xingxing* refers to the emotions of sympathy and appreciation evoked because of sharedness—similar life experiences, talents, and views, among others. In this context, the term is unmistakably gendered because only women, not men, could have intimate understanding of Yunzhen's experiences. We have no reason to suspect that Xue Shaohui herself had been subjected to abusive treatment in her marital home;[96] therefore, here she was likely commenting on the general situations all educated women would have experienced to some extent and in some form or fashion when performing their roles as wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. They may not have gone through the same exact kind of hardships, tragedies, and emotional torment as Yunzhen did, but they could find various elements in her experiences relatable.

To be sure, conjugal separation also struck an emotional chord with men of the Qing, as it was a widespread social reality and way of life to which men had no choice but to adapt as well. The high level of physical mobility in the Qing was integral to the unprecedented growth of the empire, both geographically and demographically. As an increasing number of educated men took to the road to study, work, take civil examinations, seek employment, serve on government posts, or conduct trade, wives were increasingly often left behind to look after the elderly and the young. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, spousal separation had become such a significant issue that couples themselves and their biographers counted the lengths of the separation in precise days. Lady Zhang, Zhao Huaiyu's 趙懷玉 (1747–1823) second wife, made a small book to record the dates of his partings. She titled it "Growing Old Together" (xie lao 偕老). Zhao wrote after her death, "[She made the book] as if she knew my time at home would be brief and therefore saw my partings as especially significant. We were married for six years, but we were together for only 653 days."[97] In his epitaph for the female poet Wu Qiongxian 吳瓊仙 (1766–1803), Hong Liangji 洪亮吉 comforted Wu's husband by stressing the fact that the couple was separated for only half a year in their twenty-year marriage.[98] Writing about another friend's wife, Hong noted that in their ten years of marriage, the couple was only together for three years, and she accompanied him on his travels for no more than several dozen days.[99]

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[95] Xue Shaohui, "Yaohua" 瑤華, in *Daiyunlou shiwenji* 黛雲樓詩文集 (1911 edition. Harvard-Yenching collection), Juan shang/18a.

[96] This observation draws on Nanxiu Qian's comprehensive work on Xue Shaohui. See Qian, *Politics, Poetics, and Gender in Late Qing China: Xue Shaohui and the Era of Reform* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

The heightened consciousness about the pain of conjugal separation was brought to the fore in conjunction with the popularization of the "perfect match" marriage ideal and the increasing recognition of affection in marriage. The Qing idea of the "perfect match" glorified intellectual companionship and emotional connection between husband and wife, and it was represented symbolically through the imagery of husband and wife reading, composing poetry, and creating works of art, all in an intimate physical space. The new ideal fostered an intense awareness of the joys of conjugal companionship and the harshness of forced separation for married couples.

Although conjugal separation impacted the emotional wellbeing of both husband and wife, their experiences with it bore little resemblance to each other in other regards. One crucial difference was that, being away, men avoided having to deal with the day-to-day operations of the household, while the stay-at-home wives had to carry out all duties for the household. The letters of Chen Ershi, a rough contemporary of Yunzhen, illustrate the "trivial family matters" to which Xue Shaohui might have been referring. Ershi's husband, Qian Yiji, took his mother's coffin from Beijing to his native place of Jiaxing, Zhejiang, and Ershi stayed behind with their children and his concubine. The following excerpt, typical of her letters, describes the household matters with a focus on family health issues and the children's education:

> Three little children's ulcers have all gone, and they have stopped taking "Four-sages soup" [sisheng tang 四聖湯]. However, the sores that have grown on their ears have not been cured. This is not a serious illness so there is no need to worry about it. I haven't gotten neck or teeth ulcers lately, and my ear infection is cured, but for some reason the scabs on my ears haven't fallen off. I have been taking some medicine that suits my condition pretty well, and I have a fairly good appetite …
>
> It's not very cold in the capital this year, and the fireplaces in our rooms have not been used. He [their young son] takes the room that faces [our bedroom], Ying [eldest son] takes the inner room, Little Three and Little Four take the west room.

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[97] Zhao Huaiyu, *Shouan jushi zixu nianpu lue* 收庵居士自敘年譜略 (Beijing: Beijing Tushuguan chubanshe,1999), 117:239.

[98] Hong Liangji, *Hong Liangji ji* 洪亮吉集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), 1017.

[99] Hong, *Hong Liangji ji*, 336.

> They are all in front of my eyes, and it is convenient to look after them. The two girls' rooms face south and there is no need to use a fireplace. Xiongjing came over on the sixteenth, and the six pieces of small sheep fur were received after inspection. The children's winter clothes are all prepared, and [these items] are for next year's clothes.
>
> Aying [the eldest son] has been willing to study recently and has read thoroughly two volumes of the Zuo Commentary. He wrote an essay that shows he has made some progress. As in the past, I asked Wuting to evaluate it. The original is presented to you here. Daughter Yi began to take new lessons and she recited eight lines six times. She felt so good about herself! She took Little Three as her student and has taught her two words every day. Surprisingly, Little Three has memorized them.[100]

The very detailed letter shows how Ershi put all her energy into making sure that their children were well taken care of. These were only some of the tedious routines she handled. Based on her study of Chen Ershi's letters, Binbin Yang summarizes "the typical daily work of a gentry wife" as involving tasks in four main areas: managing accounts, managing the maids and servants, educating the children, and guarding family health.[101] It is particularly worth noting that, being a household of the upper elite, Ershi's family was in a good shape all things considered. Still, a regular topic in her letters was money. Ershi had to constantly juggle money around, including borrowing and selling or pawning dowry items, to make ends meet.

In a way, Ershi is not the most representative case of a stay-behind wife. For one thing, Ershi's separation from her husband was relatively short, and she and her husband were able to send each other letters frequently. More importantly, Erhsi had substantial control over the household. With her mother-in-law's passing, the Chens were at the time a nuclear family. As they sojourned in Beijing on Qian Yiji's official appointment, Ershi also faced fewer entanglements with the relationship issues that doomed the harmony of many extended families. Most wives who stayed behind to carry on household duties and looked after the old and young, however, would have experienced much more challenging situations.

It is important to stress that recognizing women's distinctive connection with the Yunzhen story does not mean dismissing the genuineness of male sentiment. Qing literati's emotional capacity for sympathy and affection towards the women in their lives—mothers, daughters, and sisters, as well as wives—is well documented.[102] Their personal writings were replete with intimate observations of how their female relatives upheld the households, especially in the absence of men or when they suffered mistreatment and abuse as Yunzhen did. Male sojourning increased their consciousness of their wives' roles in their lives and the contributions to their families. Historians have also shown that from the late Ming to the Qing it grew steadily more popular for husbands to publicly, in conventional and innovative ways, pay tribute to their wives and commemorate their relationships.[103]

Regardless of the gendered understanding of the letter, readers of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, male and female, saw in the image of Yunzhen some of the most fundamental attributes and cultural ideas that defined an ideal wife for their time: devotion to her duties, impeccability in her conduct, resilience and dignity in coping with hardships, sophisticated education that allowed her to teach her children, and, last but not least, the talent and sensibility that were essential for forming the ideal "perfect match" marriage. Yunzhen was the perfect wife and companion whom readers could idealize and perhaps more importantly, to whom they felt relatable. These attributes and cultural ideas, it appears, continue to appeal to the educated women and men across the cultural spectrum in late Qing and early Republican times. While she received heartfelt praise from reformers like Xue Shaohui and Ying Lianzhi, she was also upheld as a role model for those who believed virtues of Chinese women surpassed those of the "civilized nations."[104]

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[100] Chen, *Tingsonglou yigao*, chubian shang, 603.

[101] Yang, *Heroines of the Qing*, 120–21.

[102] See, for example, Weijing Lu, "'A Pearl in the Palm:' A Forgotten Symbol of the Father–Daughter Bond." *Late Imperial China* 31.1 (2010), 62–97; Katherine Carlitz, "Mourning, Personality, Display: Ming Literati Commemorate Their Mothers, Sisters, and Daughters," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 15.1 (2013), 30–68; Huang, *Intimate Memory*, 157–75.

[103] Martin W. Huang, *Intimate Memory*, chap. 7; Lu, *Arranged Companions*, chap. 2.

Conclusions

Possibly partially reconstructed and certainly widely circulated and commented on, the Yunzhen letter began as a personal correspondence, but its wide circulation transformed it into a sort of subject of cultural consumption and a focal point of commentary for Qing readers. A close and contextualized "cross reading" of the letter and the commentaries opens a fresh window into presentations, perceptions, and sentiments concerning women, marriage, and the family. What part of Yunzhen's story Qing readers identified with might have varied, but the range of subjects that appeared in the letter gives a good indication of where the readers found resonance: the breakdown of family bonds; the hardships endured by a stay-behind wife, including the mistreatment by a mother-in-law (or stepmother-in-law) and slander by family members; the challenge of dealing with financial strain; the tragedy of losing family members; and the duties of educating a son who did not show promise; all while enduring loneliness with a husband long absent from home. As male sojourning became prevalent during this time, conjugal separation grew to be a way of life for the literati, and educated women were thrust into challenging situations similar to those that Yunzhen confronted.

At a deeper level, the Yunzhen phenomenon may be deciphered as a sign of the times in that it captured the deep-rooted struggles of the literati. Readers responded intensely to the "sadness" that characterized the Yunzhen story because the story struck an emotional chord with the Qing literary public, and it provided an outlet for their collective expression of emotions. In reading the sentimental commentaries on the letter, we catch a glimpse of the anxiety the literati class had to cope with in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The once magnificent empire was in decline under the tremendous pressure of demographic explosion, domestic unrest, and foreign aggression, and opportunities for upward social and economic mobility were shrinking. The prevalence of male sojourning, a symptom of social instability, produced stress on family life, while competition for resources threatened the solidarity of the extended family. The literati reactions to the Yunzhen story, in this sense, encapsulated the anxieties particular to that era.

Placing the Yunzhen letter in the context of the cultural tradition of literati enthusiasm for works attributed to anonymous women, we observe connections as well as differences between the Yunzhen case and the *tibishi* and Shuangqing cases, discussed in the beginning of this article. The literary quality of these works, obviously, was an important force that drove the interest of the literary public. Tragedy and suffering were also central to all three cases. Elements of loss and suffering can always elicit sympathy, but during the late Ming and the Qing, when the *cainű* culture thrived, the empathy became more intensified when the loss and suffering happened to women of great talent. Here the Yunzhen letter also departs from the other two cases: unlike the anonymous *tibishi* authors and Shuangqing, Yunzhen was not a hopeless victim. Readers saw in her image dignity, authority, and determination, the kind of attributes for an ideal wife and companion their era called for to meet the challenges of the time.

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[104] Zhang, *Nanyuan conggao*, 812–13.

Cite this article: Lu W (2025). Mystery and History: Revisiting "A Letter to My Husband" by Yunzhen. *Journal of Chinese History* **9**, 34–61. https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2023.15