Beyond Stereotypes: The Twelve Beauties in Qing Court Art and the "Dream of the Red Chamber"

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A handsome poster attracted people to the conference Women and Literature in Ming-Qing China, which led to the publication of this volume (Fig. 12.1). Its reproduction of three portraits of women, instead of revealing real literary women in their historical setting, reflects a current attempt to identify such women in traditional painting. The three pictures, though centuries apart in date, are juxtaposed because each depicts a woman or women engaged in the act of reading. Together they offer a pictorial translation of the conference's title ("Women and Literature") and therefore become emblematic of the scholarly gathering. But this modern synthesis is supported by and attests to a historical generalization: created by different artists and representing different subjects, the three pictures nevertheless show striking similarities in theme, iconography, and pictorial style. Without consulting their titles and inscriptions, no viewer, not even a specialist on Chinese painting, could know immediately that the top picture portrays the Tang dynasty courtesaan poet Yu Xuanji, the figures in the middle picture are two anonymous Han dynasty palace ladies, and the bottom painting simply depicts an idealized Beauty (meiren).

Such a thematic, stylistic, and iconographic generalization in art and literature is often termed a "stereotype." But this description, or rather qualification, is essentially meaningless and counterproductive, because it dismisses a complex historical process in which a uniform pattern of imagination and representation gradually prevails to control not only the construction of fictional characters and historical personages but also the self-imaging of author, reader, and viewer. Moreover, the notion of a "stereotype" is largely based on formal resemblance and ignores how similar (and even identical) images assume different meaning in different contexts. It also overlooks the dialectical relationship between convention and invention. True, a dominant model in literary and artistic production is essentially conservative, but deliberate variations on an existing model also serve to measure creativity. A literary or pictorial formula is thus necessarily adopted and manipulated by artists with creative intention.

This deconstruction of the "stereotype" as a historical concept underlies my discussion of "the twelve beauties," a set of female images known in Chinese as shier meiren or shier jinchai. (The first term means literally "the twelve beauties"; the second, "the twelve golden hairpins," a synecdochical designation for such figures.) These images interest me, first, for the difficulty of classifying and evaluating them: they do not lend themselves to the traditional divisions of court, popular, and literati culture; neither can they be easily identified as portraits, narratives, or genre scenes. Pin-ups of Qing court painting and popular New Year prints, the "twelve beauties" seem to conform to a standard, impersonal female imagery in late imperial China. But a similar grouping of female figures also dominates Cao Xueqin's (d. 1763) Dream of the Red Chamber (Hong lou meng), undoubtedly the most creative literary work of the period. My analysis here of the "twelve beauties" is therefore necessarily double-edged. On the one hand, by linking sets of "twelve beauties" in early Qing literature and art into a single interpretation, it explores common patterns of literary and artistic expressions and attempts to decipher their shared meaning. On the other hand, it also recognizes, as Judith Mayne put it, that "structures and codes are always provisional, and that a reading of what falls through the cracks of dominant structures is ultimately more productive" (Mayne, 17). I hope through such an investigation to show how the standard grouping of the "twelve beauties" lends itself to specific forms of imagination and desire.

The Architecture of the Imagination: "The Twelve Beauties" in Cao Xueqin's Land of Illusion

When Cao Xueqin introduces himself at the beginning of the Dream of the Red Chamber as its transmitter and editor rather than its
author, among the contributions he claims to have made is “renaming” the book *The Twelve Golden Hairpins of Jinling* (*Jinling shier chezi*, often translated as *The Twelve Beauties of Jinling*). All the commentators, starting from the one known as Red Inkstone (Zhiyanzhai), caution against a straightforward reading of Cao Xueqin’s alternative title: “According to this title the story must be about twelve Jinling girls; but readers find many more girls of various ranks in the novel. If it means twelve specific girls among many, Xueqin never identifies them here. Only in a later chapter, ‘The Dream in the Red Chamber,’ does the hero Jia Baoyu... discover the files of ‘the twelve beauties of Jinling,’ who are further referred to in twelve songs in that chapter” (Zhiyanzhai 1.2b).

Here Red Inkstone explores the double significance of the “twelve beauties” in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a group of individual characters and as a collective epitome of numerous girls. Cao Xueqin himself must be held responsible for this conceptual ambiguity. Red Inkstone’s comment was inspired by Baoyu’s question, which he voices upon first discovering the files of the “twelve beauties of Jinling” during his dream journey to the Land of Illusion: “People all say what a big place Jinling is. Surely there should be more than just twelve names?” His guide, the goddess Disenchanted (Jinghuan), answers him: “Certainly there are a great many girls in the whole province, but only those most crucial [jinyao] ones deserve recording” (Hawkes and Minford, 1: 132). Why are these twelve characters considered “most crucial” by the goddess, who is actually the mistress of the Land of Illusion? The answer must be sought in their fictional (or illusory) status as personifications of typical images, characteristics, situations, and values. Red Inkstone therefore commented on the “Twelve Songs of the Dream of the Red Chamber” (“Hong lou meng shier qu”): “Although only these twelve beauties are stated here, all girls are alluded to and all situations are included.” The twelve beauties are therefore a literary device that allows both generalization and individualization. It is at this juncture that these figures are linked to a fictional feminine space, which also generalizes female qualities while providing a specific environment. An effective way to explicate this linkage, I propose, is to reread the novel’s fifth chapter — “Baoyu Visits the Land of Illusion; Disenchanted Stages the ‘Dream of Golden Days’” — which introduces the twelve beauties in an imaginative dream world.

A well-known episode in this chapter is Baoyu’s discovery of a se-
ries of cryptic poems in the files of "the twelve beauties of Jinling." Literary analysts agree that these poems contain the key to the novel's basic plot. Great efforts have been made to decipher these riddles, but the significance of the files as a physical property of an imaginary place has remained virtually unexplored. This neglect is understandable: scholars of literature are sensitive to text; the relationship between the cryptic poems and the novel's overall narrative naturally arouses and dominates their interest. This emphasis on textuality nevertheless overlooks other important signifiers of meaning, such as the files' format and manner of storage, their painted images, and especially their architectural setting. The implications of these tangible features cannot be fully uncovered by a close analysis of the files alone, but must be detected through two stages of a contextual reading, first by situating the files in the physical context described in the novel and then by situating this textual context in the material world that produced it. Indeed, Cao Xueqin himself never reduced the files of the twelve beauties to isolated cryptic passages. In his story these files are concrete objects inside an architectural complex. To discover them one has to travel into these complex, penetrating layers of barriers to reach the secrets they conceal. Even finding the files does not end this imaginary journey: the Land of Illusion must be inexhaustible; more about the twelve beauties will be told in other locations inside this imaginary realm.

Since this is essentially the story of Baoyu's journey to the Land of Illusion, his discovery of the files is a single episode in the dream narrative, and this narrative gradually unfolds as the reader follows Baoyu's travels through a series of imaginary spaces. It is important to realize that the twelve beauties are not merely referred to in the files; they are introduced in several places in the Land of Illusion with shifting emphases and increasing complexity. After Baoyu has read the files in their solemn official/ceremonial storage space, the twelve beauties are introduced again in a garden setting by twelve singing girls and, finally, represented by a single girl who is waiting for Baoyu in an inner bed chamber. The reader's changing perception of these illusory characters is therefore framed by the Land of Illusion as an architectural construction. This, in turn, means that the author Cao Xueqin's literary imagining of the twelve beauties is guided by an architectural imagery, whose spatial structure has the potential to be transformed into a temporal sequence of events and experiences. I call such architectural imagery "the architecture of the imagination," not only because it provides a narrative with a physical environment but, more important, because it determines the structure of the storytelling. My investigation of this architecture of imagination thus differs fundamentally in intention from much previous detective work that tried to track down definitive models for the places described in the novel. Studies in this tradition fall into the category of biographical research, which aims to establish links between Cao Xueqin's life (especially, places he had been or known) and his writing. My interest, on the other hand, is not limited to identifying specific locations that Cao Xueqin may have been familiar with and could have used as his models. Instead, my foci are the sources, materials, and logic of his imagination and his construction of places and characters, and my method of exploring these is to study his architectural imagery and its relationship—both parallels and paradoxes—with certain established architectural types in eighteenth-century China.

In his dream, Baoyu first arrives at a place with "marble terraces and vermilion balustrades"—a set phrase to describe palaces. A huge stone archway leads into this place; four large characters above the entrance identify it as Taixu huanjing or the Land of Illusion (Fig. 12.2). A couplet inscribed on the sides of the archway (which has become all too familiar to students of Chinese literature) declares:

Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true;  
Real turns into not-real when the unreal's real.

The archway thus symbolizes a liminal space, where reality and illusion lose their definitions, since they can transform into each other. Having passed through it, the goddess Disenchantment guides Baoyu to another gate, this time a gongmen, the front gate of a palatial compound. It too bears a couplet, but the central theme is now qing—passion or love:

Ancient earth and sky, marvel that love's passion  
should outlast all time.  
Star-crossed men and maids, groan that love's debts  
should be so hard to pay.

Located within the archway, however, this gate as well as the palatial compound behind it must belong to a space where qing transcends real and unreal, truth and fiction.

Following Disenchantment, Baoyu enters this gate and then another gate, until he finds himself enclosed by palatial halls on all sides.
The halls to his left and right are rows of offices; an inscribed board above the doorway to each proclaims its official function: Department of Fond Infatuation, Department of Cruel Rejection, Department of Early Morning Weeping, Department of Late Night Sobbing, Department of Spring Fever, Department of Autumn Grief, and so on. Disenchantment explains that registers in these departments record the past, present, and future of girls from all over the world, and that no earthly eyes are allowed to see the secrets they contain. But her explanation only arouses Baoyu's curiosity the more, and he begs and pleads till the goddess lets him glance inside the Department of Star-crossed Love. What he sees are "a dozen or more large cupboards with paper strips pasted on their doors on which are written the names of different provinces." Three cupboards labeled with his own birthplace catch his eye: "Jinling, Twelve Beauties of, Main Register," "Jinling, Twelve Beauties of, Supplementary Register No. 1," and "Jinling, Twelve Beauties of, Supplementary Register No. 2."

Stretching out his hand he opened the door of the second one, took out "Supplementary Register No. 2," which was like a large album, and opened it at the first page.

It was a picture, but not of a person or a view. The whole page was covered with dark ink washes representing storm-clouds or fog, followed on the next page by a few lines of verse:

Seldom the moon shines in a cloudless sky,
And days of brightness all too soon pass by.
A noble and aspiring mind
In a base-born frame confined,
Your charm and wit did only hatred gain,
And in the end you were by slanders slain,
Your gentle lord's solicitude in vain.

(Hawkes and Minford, 1: 132–33)

Readers familiar with the novel can easily solve this riddle: the poem's first two lines play on the name of Baoyu's maid Qingwen (Skybright); the subsequent lines predict her untimely death. But as I proposed earlier, such literary identification is not the purpose of my discussion. I cite this page of the files because it is the first page that Baoyu encounters in his dream. Once he opens this page, he enters a new stage of experience: before this moment he has been discovering an unfamiliar place; now he pauses to engage in an act of reading. These two stages of dream experience, however, are related in a continuous narrative framed by a coherent architectural imagery. There is
little doubt that this imagery is inspired by a type of palatial architecture. We realize this connection not only because Cao Xueqin consistently referred to structures in the Land of Illusion with terms for palatial buildings—gong (palace), gongmen (palatial gate), dian (palatial hall), and si (government department)—but, more important, because the configuration of these structures coincides with the spatial and symbolic plan of this architectural type.

A prominent feature of the Land of Illusion is a series of gates, which transform an undifferentiated void into a number of distinguished yet interconnected places, each with its definite physical boundary and specified symbolism. Elsewhere I have argued that an obsession with repeated gates along a central axis—an architectural device that simultaneously creates spatial enclosures and a temporal continuum—emerged when the ancient Chinese began to construct their first royal palaces. The culmination of this tradition was the Forbidden City of the Ming and Qing dynasties, a labyrinth of broken rectangles linked by what seemed an endless chain of gates—archways, gate houses, and large and small gongmen.3 During a grand audience, a minister undertook a prolonged ritual journey, passing through layers of gates to reach the emperor's throne; his silent experience was voiced by an early twentieth-century visitor to the Forbidden City: “He passed through one blank wall and beneath one brooding gate-house after another, to find beyond it only a featureless avenue leading to yet another wall and gate. Reality was softening into a dream. His mind, so long attentive to a distant goal somewhere ahead in this labyrinth of straight lines, so long expecting a climax that never seemed to come” (Willettis, 678–79).

The writer of this passage hints at an important factor that helps induce the dream-like feeling of such a journey: the architecture of the imperial palace, or any structure modeled on this building type, dissolves the sense of reality. As a visitor passes through one gate after another, he enters deeper and deeper into a system of consecutive enclosures. Reality softens into a dream because all the architectural elements framing his journey exaggerate the speed and effect of dislocation: although only a few gates from the outside world, he finds himself part of a silent realm of artificiality, an enclosed architectural space that produces its own standards of perception. We are reminded of Baoyu's journey to the Land of Illusion; to enter this land he must first pass under the stone archway bearing the couplet "Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true; / Real turns into not-real when the unreal's real." With this proclamation the archway marks the true beginning of Baoyu's dream (i.e., a state of non-differentiation between real and unreal), which then takes a structural form in accordance with a codified architectural plan.

As I have briefly summarized, the first major event in Baoyu's dream—the discovery of the files of the twelve beauties of Jinling—takes place within a palatial compound. Several features of this compound demand attention: first, it is a place of absolute authority, where the fates of "girls from all over the world" are determined and recorded. Second, it has imperial status, since the girls' files and registers are classified by province, in the same way that civil registrations are kept by the government. Third, it is an anonymous place without people or activity. Even the offices are not active departments of administration but archives where stocks of files are stored in coffin-like cupboards. Fourth, the girls registered here no longer possess proper names and physical forms but are represented by secret verbal and visual codes. The form of their files—albums containing twelve leaves—was a standard format in Ming and Qing painting (see Figs. 12.6–7). But instead of portraying the women, these albums allude to them through pictorial riddles. What Baoyu finds pictured on the pages are, for example, "two dead trees with a jade belt hanging in their branches," "a pile of snow in which a golden hairpin lay half-buried," and "a beautiful jade which had fallen into the mud." Red Inkstone comments: "Here the author has borrowed his technique from the divinatory books known as the Tuihei tu, in order to hint upon the destiny and fate of the young maidens in the Daguanyuan garden" (Zhiyanzhai, 5.7b–8a).

No less important is the architecture of this place: Cao Xueqin's description of the palatial compound implies a courtyard structure with double gongmen and a central audience hall flanked by two rows of offices.4 With all the indications of its political symbolism explored above, an eighteenth-century reader of the Dream of the Red Chamber would hardly miss the parallel between this "heavenly realm" and the most famous palatial compound on earth—the Hall of Supreme Harmony (Taishedian), which was the ceremonial center of the Forbidden City (Fig. 12.3). Although the hall was off-limits to all but top officials attending grand imperial ceremonies, the image of this most solemn place became known to less privileged people through architectural drawings and reports by participants at royal events. It was no secret that two great gates—the Meridian Gate (Wumen) and the Gate of
them were full of deliciously fragrant fairy blooms and rare aromatic herbs.

Gleam of gold pavement flashed on scarlet doors,
And in jade walls jewelled casements snow white shone.

“Hurry, hurry! Come out and welcome the honored guest!” he
heard Disenchantment calling to someone inside, and almost at once
a bevy of fairy maidens came running from the palace, lotus-sleeves
fluttering and feather-skirts billowing, each as enchantingly beautiful
as the flowers of spring or the autumn moon. (Hawkes and Minford
1:136)

This sharp change in the environment and mood of Baoyu’s
dream journey, coinciding with an abrupt transition in Cao Xueqin’s
narrative and language (which suddenly becomes extremely ornate),
is again inspired by the imagery of a palatial-style structure, which is
always divided into two principal sections: qianchao (the audience
halls in front) and houting (the inner court at rear). In the Forbidden
City, the qianchao is centered on the Hall of Supreme Harmony; the
houting forms the imperial household and consists of a honeycomb
of residences for royal concubines as well as theaters and gardens of
various sizes. The designs of these two sections accord with their con-
trasting yet complementary functions and symbolism: the front halls
are impersonal and monumental, without any landscaping to soften
the buildings’ severe appearance; the rear chambers are intimate and
intricate, surrounded by rare flowers, old trees, and strange rocks. The
front halls manifest the public image of the master of the imperial city;
the rear chambers conceal his private life and his women. After hav-
ing visited the ceremonial/administrative center of the Land of Illu-
sion, Baoyu has now entered a place equivalent to the inner court. In
other words, he has left the locus of male power and finds himself inside
a female quarter. (Indeed, one of the fairies complains to Disen-
chantment for bringing him into this “pure, maidenly precinct.”) Once
inside, Baoyu looks around the women’s room: there are “musical in-
struments, antique bronzes, paintings by old masters, and poems by
new poets”—all hallmarks of the gracious living of a talented beauty
(see Fig. 12.7c).

This “inner court” offers a good example for defining feminine
space, a key concept explored throughout this essay. This term refers
to a real or fictional place that is perceived, imagined, and represented
as a woman. Conceptually, it must be distinguished from “feminine
figures” and “feminine objects,” not because these are conflicting no-
tions but because a feminine space takes figures and objects as its constituent elements and thus encompasses them. Unlike the image of a woman or her symbols and belongings (e.g., her mirror, censer, flowers), a feminine space is a spatial entity—an artificial world composed of landscape, vegetation, architecture, atmosphere, climate, color, fragrance, light, and sound as well as selected human occupants and their activities. An analogy for such a spatial entity is a stage with its props, background scenery, sound and lighting effects, and actresses. Just as the effectiveness of the theater relies on all such components, a representation of feminine space synthesizes multiple genres. A painted feminine space, as I will demonstrate in this essay, derives its vocabulary from individual genres such as portraiture, flower-and-bird painting, still life, landscape painting, and architectural drawing. A literary construction of feminine space, such as the one Baoyu finds in the Land of Illusion, not only is a vernacular narrative but also incorporates elements of poetry and drama.

The twelve dancers begin to sing while dancing to a suite of twelve songs entitled “The Dream of the Red Chamber.” Scholars agree that these songs, like the files, also predict the fate of the twelve beauties of Jinling (that is, the twelve beauties in the Main Register). This agreement has again inspired countless efforts to relate these songs to the novel’s overall narrative, but my initial reservations about this research method remain: once more, the significance of these songs lies not only in their lyrics but also in the form and place of their performance. This alternative focus of inquiry leads to a question: Why should the fate of the twelve beauties be told for a second time in the Land of Illusion?

This seeming repetition is meaningful because it highlights opposing points of view in a representational symmetry. Although the literary message of the files and songs may be identical, the manner of delivering this message must differ according to the place of delivery and the person (or non-person) who delivers it. Unlike the files, which were productions of an anonymous male power that transformed living women into archives sealed in cupboards and offices, the songs are staged by female performers in an inner chamber of women. Instead of translating characters and events into unfeeling homonyms and analogies, these songs turn stories into rhymed verses and show far greater sympathy for their subject. No narrator appears in the files, but the songs are often sung in the first-person voice. One pair of examples will suffice to show the difference. Both the fourth file from

the main register and the fourth song from the suite refer to Tanchun, one of Baoyu’s sisters.

(file):

A picture, which shows two people flying a kite and a weeping girl on a boat over a great expanse of sea, is followed by a quatrain:

Blessed with a shrewd mind and a noble heart,
Yet born in time of twilight and decay,
In spring through tears at river’s bank you gaze,
Borne by the wind a thousand miles away.

(Hawkes and Minford, 1: 134).

(song):

Sail, boat, a thousand miles through rain and wind,
Leaving my home and dear ones far behind.
I fear that my remaining years
Will waste away in homesick tears.
Father dear and mother dear,
Be not troubled for your child!
From of old our rising, falling
Was ordained; so now this parting.
Each in another land must be;
Each for himself must fend as best he may;
Now I am gone, oh do not weep for me.

(Hawkes and Minford, 1: 141).

We may equate this and other songs with arias sung by heroines in Ming and Qing drama (see Xu Fuming, “Hong lou meng,” 139–40). Cao Xueqin’s decision to have twelve girls perform these songs must have been intentional. The intention seems transparent: in their performance, these girls embody the voices and feelings of the twelve beauties of Jinling and are therefore playing dramatic roles. What is being staged in this inner chamber are not individual songs but a “play” that generates dramatic illusions.

If in the earlier palatial compound the twelve beauties were represented through the medium of the law (i.e., through the files containing the verdict of their fate), they are now associated with the staging and illusionism of a play in the rear section of the Land of Illusion. Again, we find a perfect parallel to this second space in the Forbidden City. Between 1771 and 1776, the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–95) spent more than 1,430,000 taels of silver to rebuild the complex of Peaceful Longevity (Ningshugong) for his use after abdicating the throne. Occupying the northeastern quarter of the Forbidden City, it is
both an integral part and a miniaturization of the imperial palace. Imitating the main palace, it has its own front ceremonial center, the Hall of Absolute Sovereignty (Huangjidian), and an inner court; the latter includes a fantastically beautiful garden called the Garden of Peaceful Longevity (Ningshou huayuan). At the northern end of this garden stands the last building in the entire complex, the Lodge of Retiring from Hard Work (Juanqinzhai).

A visitor recognizes the lodge’s unique status even before entering it: instead of imperial yellow, its glazed roof is blue and reflects the color of the sky. The hall is at least sixty feet long, but its interior is surprisingly cramped and dark, a result of a curious decision to divide the main section into small compartments on two levels in an irregular fashion. Following a tunnel-like hallway, the visitor turns left and right, passes doors of different shapes and sizes, and finally reaches the innermost room. His eyes suddenly open and seem dazzled by light, not only because of the dramatic change in the room’s size and proportion—it is now a large, single-level hall with a twenty-foot-high ceiling—but also because of the illusionistic murals that transform solid walls into transparent windows open to outdoor scenes (Fig. 12.4). The artists, possibly the famous Italian painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) and his Chinese assistants, ingeniously painted an enormous wisteria trellis over the entire ceiling; they also heavily shaded each of the numerous clusters of purple flowers to create the visual illusion that they are three-dimensional objects hanging down from the trellis. A bamboo fence is depicted on the walls to surround the room; beyond the intricate windows and moon door is a great expanse of space. There are a series of palatial halls, whose diminishing size testifies to the artists’ familiarity with the “linear drawing method.” Cranes, also depicted in a typical Western realistic style, are walking in the open courtyard among rare flowers and herbs. Farther away, a range of rocky mountains is painted against the blue sky.

No people are depicted in the murals. The reason is simple: these visual images were not meant to be appreciated independently, but to provide a backdrop for dramatic performances. Amazingly, a small theater stands in the middle of the hall, surrounded by the flowering trellis, palaces, animals, birds, rivers, and mountains. The stage and the murals must have been designed and conceived as parts of a larger illusionistic entity: a bamboo fence, exactly like the painted fence in the mural, encloses the back stage. We may well imagine that during a performance, characters in a drama would emerge on the stage as though from the illusory world inside the painting. It would be difficult to find a better illustration of Cao Xueqin’s conception of the Land of Illusion, a place where fiction is truth and the unreal is real.

Still, unreal becomes real only in the perception of a spectator. Two couches, arranged one above the other on two stories of a wooden structure, were designed as seats for the emperor to watch performances. A small room next to the couch on the second floor is again decorated with trompe d’oeil murals, but this time a beautiful lady is represented. Lifting a curtain, she seems about to enter the chamber, where the emperor rests after watching a play (Fig. 12.5). This image brings us back to the final episode of Baoyu’s dream journey. When the songs of “The Dream of the Red Chamber” fail to enlighten him about the tragic fate of the twelve beauties, Disenchantment takes him into a dainty bedroom—no longer a general feminine space with its paintings and antiques but a private, erotic realm. The furnishings and hangings of the bed were more sumptuous and beautiful than anything he has ever seen. To his intense surprise there was a fairy girl sitting in the middle of it. Her rose-fresh beauty reminded
him strongly of Baochai, but there was also something about her of Daiyu’s delicate charm” (Hawkes and Minford, 1: 146-47). This girl thus unites Baochai and Daiyu (and more generally, the twelve beauties) in one person, and she is called Beauty Combined (Jianmei) or the Pleasant One (Keqing). Disenchantment marries her to Baoyu, but the couple’s intimate love-making leads only to a nightmare: Baoyu falls into the Ford of Error and no one, not even Disenchantment, can help him. This dream-within-a-dream cancels the previous dream and brings Baoyu back to reality: he has lost his last chance to transcend illusion, and Cao Xueqin’s story of The Twelve Golden Hairpins begins in earnest.

The Iconography of the Twelve Beauties: Figure, Prop, Grouping, Activity, Spectatorship, Illusionism

An early Qing reader of the Dream of the Red Chamber would have been familiar with the grouping of twelve girls as the “twelve golden hairpins” (see Feng Qiyong and Li Xifan, 5; Hanyu dacidian 1: 806). The term can be traced to pre-Tang times. During and after the Tang, it increasingly referred to a group of concubines in a household. Although this usage continued in Ming and Qing literature and appeared in poems by Cao Yin (1658–1712) and Yuan Mei (1716–98), the term also became associated with beautiful and talented courtesans. In late Ming Jinling, for example, twelve courtesans famous for their poetic compositions were grouped together as the “twelve golden hairpins” (see Wang Shunu, 230). During the early Qing, the term was further related to the new vogue for paintings of twelve women. The poet Yin Jishan (1696–1771), a contemporary of Cao Xueqin, once visited the mansion of the Duke of Loyalty and Bravery and composed these lines: “Where are the twelve golden hairpins?/ Lined up in the hall and dressed in new clothes are merely paintings” (see Feng Qiyong and Li Xifan, 5). Like Cao Xueqin’s heroines, these images were also products of an eighteenth-century conception of feminine space, which, as proposed in this essay, is closely related to many contemporary visual phenomena—architecture, the garden, representations of women and their activities, and visual illusionism. But Cao Xueqin re-fashioned these conventions in his masterpiece so ingeniously that these conventions were transformed into characters with feeling and life. To understand Cao Xueqin’s novel historically, therefore, we must reconstruct these conventions—an “iconography” of meiren—against which the Dream of the Red Chamber was read and appreciated at the time.

To my knowledge, systematic accounts of meiren did not come into existence till the late Ming and early Qing. One of the earliest such writings was Wei Yong’s (fl. 1643–54) “Delight in Adornment” (“Yuerong bian”), in which an anonymous meiren became the sole focus of the author’s attention. We know little about Wei Yong, except that he was from Suzhou and his other works included compilations of contemporary and ancient essays. In his preface to “Delight in Adornment,” he introduced himself as a (typical) Ming scholar who failed to pursue a successful official career and sought solace in women. Although most of his works did not survive, “Delight in Adornment” became a popular text during the Qing after Zhang Chao (fl. 1676–1700), an important literary figure of the late seventeenth century, included this essay in his influential Collectanea of Contemporary Writings (Zhaodai congshu).

Wei Yong divided his essay into thirteen sections, beginning with a general discussion of “following one’s affinity” (suixian) to meet a
beauty. The remaining twelve sections focus on various criteria for a meiren, such as age, gesture and expression, adornment, dwelling, furniture and interior decoration, activities, and maidservants. The author gradually moves from exterior to interior and from the physical environment to intimate human relationships. Readers are first offered a bipartite description of the beauty’s dwelling, appended to the main text in the first paragraph is Wei Yong’s account of his own imaginary garden.

The place where a beauty lives is like a flower bed or vase. Located north of the Pavilion of Guan-wood, encircled by the Railing of a Hundred Treasures—it must have been the former home of the Heavenly Flower Bud. Although a Confucian scholar or a humble gentleman may not have a golden room to house a beauty, he must nevertheless provide her with a boudoir so she can adorn herself. Whether in a storied gallery or in an intricate mansion, either in his second household or in his country villa, it must be a clean room unpolluted by vulgar things. Inside, there should be exquisite and tasteful utensils and objects, as well as calligraphy and painting suitable for a lady’s chamber. Outside, one should find winding balustrades along crooked paths and rare flowers that reflect one another, filling up all the space. The place can never be complete if potted flowers and miniature landscapes are absent. [Such arrangements are necessary] because a beauty is a flower’s “true self” [zhenshen] and a flower captures a beauty’s momentary image. They understand each other’s language, seek each other’s laughter, and care for each other with mutual affection. Flowers not only please a beauty’s eyes, but also enhance her appearance.

I intend to construct a compound of modest scale. Entering the gate one would find water under a zigzag bridge of nineteen turns, which would lead to a bamboo grove on an acre of land. At the other end of the forest, a row of five thatched halls would be flanked by five chambers on each side. Three layers of storied galleries would stand behind the central hall. Each layer would consist of nine rooms in the middle and six rooms on each side, and all the rooms would be connected by winding corridors. I want to surround these galleries with rare flowers, strange rocks, gnarled trees, and twisted vines—the more crowded the better. A large garden would be opened up behind the galleries; inside it I would create hills and ponds, build a tea shop, a wine shop, a study, a studio, and round thatched hut, and would arrange high cliffs, winding streams, villages, and rural cottages—all scattered in the garden in an irregular but complementary fashion. During the day I would dispatch my beauties to visit the garden’s scenic spots. At night I would gather them on an upper floor, either discussing on Buddhist scriptures or comment-

This particular section of the essay sets up a general context for the other aspects of a meiren, which Wei Yong goes on to explain. Two kinds of things make up the place of a beauty and thus transform an ordinary space into a site of femininity. The first are individual items; the second is the architectural layout. The individual items offer static “features” of a feminine space; the architectural layout provides this space with a dynamic spatial/temporal structure and points of view. The features defined in “Delight in Adornment” include environmental elements (e.g., particular kinds of buildings, paths, railings, trees, flowers, plants, rocks, decorative objects, painting and calligraphy), personal attributes (clothes and ornaments, makeup, standardized facial and bodily features), and tableaus of female activities. The first half of the section cited above is basically an itemized list of such features. The second half, on the other hand, shifts focus to an imaginary architectural complex and introduces a narrative sequence. The reader is guided through the compound, crossing the crooked bridge and penetrating the bamboo grove. He finally discovers a large garden behind layers of halls and galleries. In this hidden place, he encounters Wei’s beauties. Some late Ming and early Qing paintings are based on similar concepts of feminine space. In Huang Juan’s 1639 painting “Playing in Spring” (“Xichun tu”), clusters of beautiful women are engaged in various leisure activities inside a garden. The work’s handscroll format supplies the sense of a journey through the painted scenes. In Yang Jin’s “Amusement in a Rich Household” (“Haojia yile tu”), dated to 1688, a similar garden with its female residents are enclosed by walls, awaiting the master of the household who is returning home with his male associates.

Having observed the spatial/temporal structure of the inner court in the Land of Illusion, here I will concentrate on the features of feminine space as described by Wei Yong and other authors. It is significant that in an essay defining the hundreds of attributes characterizing a beautiful woman and her place, Wei Yong said not a single word about her individual character and physique. When her body and face become subjects of consideration, they dissolve into the fragments of a
blazon: star-bright eyes, willow-leaf eyebrows, cloud-like hair, and snow-white bosom. The question of her personal nature may indeed be irrelevant: a beauty is by definition idealized and must therefore surpass individuality. But the problem of her iconography remains: if her character and physique are never documented, how can one envision a meiren? The answer is found in the concept of feminine space as a totalizing entity. Reading through Wei’s text, we gradually realize that a beauty is essentially the sum of all the visible forms one expects to find in her place—all the pre-arranged components of her place are, in fact, features of herself. She (a constructed persona) is therefore identical to her domain (an artificial space). We identify her as a meiren not by recognizing her face but by surveying her courtyard, room, clothes, and her frozen expression and gesture. In other words, what we find in her and her place are numerous signifiers without a focus of signification.

It is therefore not surprising that after describing the beauty’s house and room, Wei Yong immediately moved on to specify her clothes and adornment in the following section, which continues to deal with her external appearance or “surface.” To qualify as a beautiful woman, “Adornment should not be excessive and yet should not be omitted altogether. . . . Casually wearing a few ornaments of pearl, gold, and jade here and there—she should possess what is called the ‘feeling of a painting’ [huyi]” (Xiangyan congshu, 1: 69). In the next section, even maidservants are considered a kind of ornamentation for a meiren: “A beauty cannot be without maids, just as a flower cannot be without leaves. If a flower stood on a bare branch, even the most famous species of peony would fail to attract my eye” (Xiangyan congshu, 1: 70).

The interior of a boudoir is the subject of a section called “An Elegant Display” (“Yagong”); the author simply reduces his job to listing some thirty items necessary for a beauty’s private room. Books, paintings, and antiques are excluded here, however: these are reserved to highlight a beauty’s “scholarly style” (rufeng), the subject of the following section (Xiangyan congshu, 1: 71).

The tendency to itemize the iconographical features of a beauty and her place achieved more extreme forms in the early Qing. Two types of “manuals” appeared. One, represented by Li Suqin’s “Gleaming Beneath the Flowers” (“Huadi shiyi”), catalogued individual female activities. Li began with a short introduction:

Like flashing colors on a butterfly’s fluttering wings, “flower events” [female activities] are too numerous to be recorded. Enchanted by those fragrant, tender beings, and also enchanted by the beauty and style of their deep courtyards and intricate chambers, I have nevertheless gone forth to compile this manual [pu] as a pastime. Please do not pay too much attention to the writing style, just consider [the items listed here] bare bones to be fleshed out in poetry [shigu]. (Xiangyan congshu, 1: 8)

Li’s “bare bones” consist of some 150 individual poetic themes summarized in pithy sentences; each has the potential to be developed into a full poetic text (or to inspire a painting). Here are a few examples: “Teaching the parrot to recite poems on a hundred flowers,” “Secretly praying before a blossoming cassia tree,” “While she sleeps under spring flowers, a reckless butterfly rushes into her red blouse,” “Commenting on a book from her lover with [paint made from] fallen petals,” “Watching flowers falling and thinking about life’s emptiness,” “Studying painting by copying the shadow of orchard and bamboo,” “Singing in the rain of falling flowers.” Li’s composition was greatly admired by Zhang Chao, who not only offered additional poetic topics in “A Supplement to ‘Gleaming Beneath Flowers’” (“Bu huadi shiyi”; Xiangyan congshu, 1: 23–24) but also wrote a preface to Li’s text. He seems to have realized the narrowness of the world of Li’s beautiful women but tried to defend Li against any possible criticism: “Those who may communicate with a beauty include only three kinds of human beings—her lover, her maids, and the ladies next door—and five kinds of non-humans—the butterfly, the bee, the oriole, paired mandarin ducks, and the parrot. Anyone or anything else is dusty and vulgar and should never be allowed to enter a meiren’s place” (Xiangyan congshu, 1: 15). (These words seem to be echoed in the Dream of the Red Chamber: in the eyes of Cao Xueqin’s hero Baoyu, only the Prospect Garden [Daguan Yuan] of his beloved young girls is pure; “anyone or anything else is dusty and vulgar.”)

The second type of itemized meiren description is exemplified by Xu Zhen’s (fl. 1659–1711) “Manual of Beautiful Women” (“Meiren pu”), which aimed to provide a more comprehensive “iconography” by listing not only a beauty’s charming activities but also her appearance, style, skill, dwelling, utensils, and proper nourishment. Xu (styled Qiuta or Qiutaozì, also known as Yanshui sanren) was from Xiushui in present-day Zhejiang province and lived his adult life in the early Qing. Like Wei Yong, he seemed never to have held a government office, and some bibliographers describe him as “poor, miserable failure” (see Liu Shide, 368). The “Manual of Beautiful Wom-
“en” first appeared as the introduction to his collection of short stories called *A Book of Talented Women*（Nücaizi shu）. This book, whose original title may have been *A Book of Beautiful Women* (Meiren shu), was completed around 1659 and published in the following decades. The “Manual of Beautiful Women” gained an independent life and greater popularity after it was included in the *Sandalwood Desk Collectanea* (Tan ji cong shu), which Wang Zhuo (b. 1636) and Zhang Chao co-published in 1695. Xu Zhen opened his essay with an explanation of the purpose of his work:

I have been suffering from love-foolishness; romantic dreams make me drunk. Although my sad financial situation forbids me to dress in silk, and although I have never had the fortune to win the devotion of a beautiful singing girl, I have been able to rank “golden hairpins,” describing them in ornate language as though flowers grew on the tip of my brush. I have collected the paragons of beauty and compiled a manual of taste in that “tender realm” (rouxiang). Now, gentlemen of style and culture who long for voluptuous and literary women can finally identify a beauty and pursue happiness based on this guide; they can investigate hidden mysteries and be forever appeased. (*Tan ji cong shu*, 146)

Following this proclamation, he classifies his “paragons” into three groups—courtesans, concubines, and the rest—who exemplify a ten-part iconography of a beautiful and talented woman:

1. **Physical appearance**: Cicada forehead; apricot tips; rhinoceros-horn teeth; creamy breasts; eyebrows like faraway mountains; glances like waves of autumn water; lotus-petal face; cloud-like hairdo; feet like bamboo shoots carved in jade; fingers like white shoots of grass; willow waist; delicate steps as though walking on lotus blossoms; neither fat nor thin; appropriate height.
2. **Style**: Casting her shadow on a half-drawn curtain; leaving her footsteps on green moss; leaning against a railing while waiting for moonrise; holding a *pijia*-guitar at an angle; glancing back before departure; throwing out an artful, captivating smile; having just finished singing and becoming fatigued from dancing.
3. **Skills**: Playing the lute; chanting poetry; playing *weiqi*-chess; playing kickball; copying ancient calligraphy before a pond; embroidering; weaving brocade; playing the vertical flute; playing dominos; comprehending musical pitches and rhymes; swinging; playing the “double-six” game.
4. **Activities**: Taking care of orchids; preparing tea; burning incense; looking at the reflection of the moon in a gold basin; watching flowers on a spring morning; composing poems about willow cats; catching butterflies; dressing clothes; harmonizing the five tastes [fine cooking]; painting her fingernails with red paint; teaching a maidservant to recite poems; comparing posies collected on Duanwu day.

5. ** Dwelling**: A gold room; a jade-storied gallery; a pearled door curtain; a screen inlaid with mother-of-pearl; an ivory bed; a lotus-blossom pink bed-net; a curtain of kingfisher feathers for the inner chamber.
6. **Seasons and moments**: Flowers blossoming in the Golden Valley Garden; bright moon over a painted pleasure-boat; snow reflected on a pearled curtain; silver candles above a tortoise-shell banquet table; fragrant plants in the setting sun; raindrops pelting banana leaves.
7. **Adornment**: A pearl shirt; an eight-piece embroidered skirt; a raw silk sleeveless dress; a pair of “phoenix-head” shoes; rhinoceros-horn hairpins; hairpins made of “cold-preventive” rhinoceros horns; jade pendants; a “love birds” belt; pearl and gem earrings; head ornaments made of kingfisher feathers; gold “phoenix” head ornaments; embroidered tap pants.
8. **Auxiliary objects**: An ivory comb; a “water-chestnut flower” mirror; a jade mirror stand; a rabbit fur writing brush; patterned letter-paper; an inkstone from Duanni; a “green silk” *jin-lute*; a jade vertical flute; a pure silk fan; rare flowers; a volume of the *Odes with Master Mao’s Commentaries* (Maoshit); a rhyming book; collections of love poetry including the *New Songs from the Jade Terrace* (*Yutai xinyong*) and the *Fragrant Dressing Case* (*Xiangluan ji*); witty maidservants; a gold incense burner; ancient vases; jade boxes; rare perfume.
9. **Food**: Seasonal fruits; fresh lichee; dried fish; “kid” wine; various kinds of delicious wine; delicacies from hills and seas; famous tea from Songluo, Jingshan, and Yangxian; various kinds of pickles in clever shapes.
10. **Special interests**: Leaning drunkenly on her lover’s shoulder; taking a noon bath in fragrant water; laughing seductively beside the pillow; secretly exchanging glances; picking up a pellet to shoot a yellow bird; showing slight jealousy. (*Tan ji cong shu*, 141-42).

Students of Chinese pictorial art will be familiar with many of the scenes and images specified here, for they form the basic motif repertoire of a type of female image in Chinese painting. Works belonging to this type, often termed *meiren hua* or “beautiful woman” paintings, proliferated steadily from Tang times onward but deliberately maintained a limited and repetitive vocabulary. The rigidity of the painting genre both led to and in turn was reinforced by a written “iconography” of beautiful women as exemplified by the writings we have examined. As suggested by the background of their authors, this type of
writing perhaps originated from the southern cities, such as Suzhou and Hangzhou, where a courtesan culture flourished and where they lived. But curiously, the standardized meiren image they advocated was welcomed by Qing rulers with great enthusiasm and strongly influenced Qing court art. Its impact on court art can be understood in terms of the changing format of painting, the changing style of representation, and the changing implication of meiren. In terms of format, sets of twelve compositions illustrating beautiful women and/or female activities became common; in terms of style, these paintings testified to a strong interest in illusionistic effects in physical settings; in terms of meiren themselves, these images gained new significance when they were transported from their original Chinese cultural context into the court of non-Chinese rulers.

The iconography of the beauty synthesized existing conventions in depicting beautiful women into neat sets of images that, as I have proposed above, were scattered signifiers without a focus of significance. Xu Zhen claimed that his manual would provide a guide for “gentlemen of style and culture who long for voluptuous and literary women.” But an early Qing gentleman who tried to follow his guide would not have found an actual woman, but only the manifestations of an ideal beauty perceivable through predetermined images framed in prefabricated situations. She would be either planting orchids, preparing tea, burning incense, practicing calligraphy, playing chess, watching flowers, composing poems, catching butterflies, weaving brocade, talking to a parrot, swinging, or enjoying painting and antiques. She would appear inside an elegant boudoir, in willows’ green shade, among beautiful flowers, under the full moon, in a pleasure-boat, or half-hidden behind a curtain. This iconography opened a door for a synthetic representation of the Beauty, which aimed to comprehend her multiple images in a single work.

It was around this time that writers and painters—indeed self-styled “connoisseurs” of beautiful and talented women—began to collect and represent twelve women in a set. A pioneer of this trend was Xu Zhen himself: his Book of Talented Women consists of twelve chapters, each centered on a paragon of beauty and literary talent. It is important to note that the number of chapters (and hence the number of paragons) was predetermined: he told his readers in chapter 8 that for a while he could only identify eleven beauties, until he heard the story of Hao Xiang’e and determined to include her to complete the set (Xu Zhen, Niucatzi shu, 101). In the end, he was able to locate sev-
Beyond Stereotypes  335

sciences: in addition to buildings and objects, we find female figures playing *weiqi-chess* (Fig. 12.6h), holding a *pipa*-guitar at an angle (Fig. 12.6i), sitting behind a half-drawn curtain (Fig. 12.6b), and attending a literary gathering (Fig. 12.6k). Being an excellent artist, however, Jiao Bingzhen was able to supply a mild sense of drama to these otherwise conventional images. In one scene, for example, three ladies are peeping at a daydreaming friend, who is portrayed in the typical “beauty in spring longing” mode (Fig. 12.6b).

The content of these pictures does not surprise us, but their drawing style does. Jiao Bingzhen’s work differs markedly from pre-Qing “beautiful woman” paintings for his extensive use of the “linear method” (*xianfa*—a Chinese term for the Western linear perspective drawing technique), which he probably learned from European astronomers when he served as an official in the imperial observatory. The borrowing of this foreign method was not simply a technical advance; rather, it added an entirely new visual dimension and semiotic field to “beautiful woman” painting. Most important, Jiao Bingzhen reinterpreted the traditional representation of feminine space. To him, this space not only was a symbol of poetic space but also had to convey visual believability; it could not simply be the sum of individual features but had to be organized according to certain overarching structural principles. This reinterpretation, however, only reinforced the original intention of “beautiful woman” painting, since what Jiao Bingzhen contributed to this art was a deepening mystery and fictionality, not reality. The women’s quarter remained a constructed space; only now this space became even more intriguing and mesmerizing. The chess-playing scene (Fig. 12.6h), for example, offers the viewer seductive figures and a seductive space. Following a receding path, the viewer’s gaze travels from the foreground to the middle ground, where a group of beautiful ladies are playing or watching a game of chess. Additional receding lines and oblique shapes—a table, trellises, and paving stones, as well as figures of diminishing sizes—encourage and sustain the visual penetration. But the inner quarter of palace ladies should never be exhausted: a door, overlapping the supposed vanishing point, stops the viewer’s eye but triggers his imagination.

Both this illusionistic style and the album format were inherited by the court painter Chen Mei (active 1720–40). Jiao Bingzhen painted his album a little after 1733. A few years later, in 1738, Chen created an album for the Qianlong emperor, which introduced a new formula in depicting the group activities of beautiful women. The activities il-
The album's twelve pages now followed a strict monthly order. Images and scenes, which in Jiao's album were still largely disconnected episodes of women's life, became integral components of a "calendar" of female activities—indeed a narrative consisting of twelve events:

The first month: Visiting flowering plum trees on a chilly night.
The second month: Playing chess in a pleasure pavilion.
The third month: Swinging under the willow trees.
The fourth month: Enjoying flowers in the courtyard (Fig. 12.7a).
The fifth month: Dressing oneself in a water pavilion.
The sixth month: Picking lotus flowers in a jade pond (Fig. 12.7b).

The seventh month: Making an offering on the Double Seventh day.
The eighth month: Watching the full moon from the Jade Terrace.
The ninth month: Enjoying chrysanthemums on the Double Ninth day.
The tenth month: Embroidering inside patterned windows.
The eleventh month: Admiring antiques on a winter day (Fig. 12.7c).
The twelfth month: Looking for plum blossoms in the snow.

The third and last representational mode of the twelve beauties focuses on neither famous historical paragons nor female activities. Instead, it continues a traditional "portrait" style; only now the subject of portrayal is no longer a single person, but twelve women (or twelve variations on a single woman) depicted or described one after another in a series of compositions. A literary work that falls into this category is Su Zhikun's (1613–87) "The Enjoyment of Twelve Leisurely Feelings" ("Xianqing shier wu"). In extremely ornate language he ex-
pressed his appreciation for a beauty’s transcendence (xián), understanding (da), and literary talent (cai), as well as for her charming manners on private occasions (Xiangyan congshu, 1: 31–36). The best pictorial example of this mode is a set of twelve female images commissioned by the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723–35) before he ascended the throne. A study of these images, as well as their architectural setting and relationship with Yongzheng’s writing, will allow us explore more deeply the meaning of twelve beauties in Qing court art.

**Imperial Feminine Space: Yongzheng’s Screen of Twelve Beauties and His “Twelve Songs on the Yuanming Yuan’s Scenic Spots”**

A set of twelve anonymous paintings, each representing an individual woman inside or outside her dwelling (Figs. 12.8a–l), was found in the early 1950s during the process of inventorizing the holdings of the Forbidden City (now the Palace Museum). Three unusual features of these works were noted at once. First, they are uncommonly large for silk paintings. Close to one meter wide and two meters tall, each canvas provided the artist with enough space to depict a life-sized female image in a vertical composition. Second, unlike a traditional Chinese handscroll or hanging scroll, which has a roller attached to one end, these paintings are flat pieces, each loosely rolled around a wooden stick when they were found. Third, although the paintings do not bear the artist’s signature, a piece of calligraphy decorating a woman’s chamber (Fig. 12.8c) is signed with three sobriquets, including the written signature “A Retired Gentleman Who Breaks Away from the Dusty World” (Pochen jushi) and two seal impressions: “Heaven Inside a Bottle” (Huizhongtian) and “The Master of the Yuanming Garden” (Yuanming zhuren). All three sobriquets were used by Yinzhen or the Yongzheng emperor, but only before 1725 while he was still a prince.

These features contributed to the paintings’ initial identification and classification. Their physical attributes, particularly their size and mounting style, led the museum’s curators to classify them as tieluo (meaning literally “gluing on and taking off”)—silk or paper paintings mounted on walls. Unlike a mural, which is a permanent architectural feature, a tieluo picture could easily be removed whenever it was found undesirable or too precious to remain a wall decoration. Tieluo pictures of the precious variety became part of the imperial art collection and were preserved in the painting storage rooms in the palace; it was believed that the twelve painted ladies fell into this category. Other factors, including the women’s life-size images, Yongzheng’s calligraphy inside the boudoir, the paintings’ striking “realistic” pictorial style, and the great attention paid to detail, further aroused speculation that the painted figures must be “portraits” of real women intimately connected to the prince. This possibility was so enticing that before further investigation or proof, the set of paintings became known as the “Twelve Consorts of Prince Yinzhen” or even the “Twelve Concubines of the Yongzheng Emperor”; such titles were then adopted in exhibitions, catalogues, and research papers (see Huan Miaozhi, Palace Museum, Gugong bowuyuan, 267).

Both opinions about the paintings’ function and subject were imprecise and potentially misleading, however. In 1986, Zhu Jiajin, a senior research fellow in the Palace Museum, discovered a short file in
the vast archives of the Internal Affairs Department (Neiwufu) of the Qing court. Written by the official in charge of the Woodwork Division (Muzuo), the file records a special edict made by the Yongzheng emperor in 1732:

A memoir from the Yuanming Garden states that the garden's treasurer kept twelve silk paintings of beautiful women [meiren], which were removed from an “enclosing screen” [weiping] in the Reading Hall Deep Inside Weeping Willows [Shenliu dushu tang]. The emperor issued the following order through Bunuch Cangzhou: “Each painting should be kept between pieces of plain paper. A wood stick should be made specially for each painting [so that the painting can be rolled onto it for better preservation].” Twelve sticks of fir wood, each three chi and three cun long, have been completed today. (Cited in Zhu Jiajin, 45)

Since this document clearly refers to the twelve painted ladies later found in the Palace Museum (which were preserved exactly as the emperor demanded), the paintings' classification and identification must be reconsidered. Most important, the file partially explains the paintings' early history. We now know that the painted ladies, instead of decorating the walls of a palace hall, originally appeared on the twelve panels of a screen; the term weiping further suggests that this screen, like many multi-panel screens that still stand in situ in the Palace Museum, “enclosed” (wei) a throne or a couch. The screen must have been created after 1709: in that year, Yongzheng, then known as Prince Yong (Yong qinwang), received the Yuanming Garden, formerly an imperial garden, from his father, the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662-1722), as a personal gift. The garden's layout and components at that time are unclear; records of this most famous Chinese garden usually describe its appearance following the enormous expansions conducted by Yongzheng's successor, Qianlong. Judging from Yongzheng's writings, the Yuanming Garden before 1725 had fewer buildings scattered throughout a broad area dotted with ponds and lakes of various sizes. It was the private summer resort of the prince,
who maintained his office inside the walled capital city, some ten miles away.

One important clue to the screen's significance is its original location: the Reading Hall Deep Inside Weeping Willows in the Yuanming Garden. Interestingly, this building seems to have held a special significance for Yongzheng, but it was seldom noted after his reign. (For some unknown reason, Qianlong seems to have deliberately ignored this site. Although all Qianlong-period illustrations of the Yuanming Garden depicted this building, it was not listed among the garden's "famous scenes" [jìng] and was rarely mentioned by the emperor in his numerous poems on the garden.) Qianlong's indifference becomes especially suspicious because his father, Yongzheng, passionately favored this place both before and after ascending the throne. Indeed, the Reading Hall Deep Inside Weeping Willows is the most frequent topic of Yongzheng's poetic writings on the Yuanming Garden.19 Among these works, a series of "Twelve Songs on the Garden's Scenic Spots" ("Yuanjing shier yong") was composed before he became emperor; the first song is about the Reading Hall (Qingshizong yuzhi wenji, juan 26):

*The Reading Hall Deep Inside Weeping Willows*

How elegant and fine are the thousand weeping willows, Embracing this thatched hall in their cool shade. Their floating strands gently brush against an inkstone; Their catkins leave dotted marks on a lute-stand. The oriole's song warms up their spring branches; The cicada's cry chills their autumn leaves. In moonlight they cast their shadows on the hall's windows, Concealing yet enhancing the fragrance of ancient books.

The images employed here—silky willow strands, fluttering catkins, singing orioles and cicadas, cool shade and shadows, and fragrant ancient books—induce a sense of intimacy and privacy that Yongzheng seemed to associate with this site. Located on the west shore of an enormous lake (later known as Fujai, or Sea of Happiness)
and surrounded by low hills on three other sides, the Reading Hall was hidden from outside; the "thousand weeping willows" must have further concealed it behind their leatly branches. The design of the building — actually an architectural complex consisting of a number of structures — did not aim at a grand public image but stressed changing viewpoints, temporal movement, and spatial intricacy. The existing drawings show three or four single-level buildings of moderate scale, connected by roofed corridors to form a zigzag pattern, stretching from the waterfront into a wooded valley (Fig. 12.9).

But the intimacy and privacy inherent in the Reading Hall must be conceived on a deeper level, beyond architecture and environment: Yongzheng described this spot as if he were writing about one of his favorite concubines. He bestowed on the site overtly feminine qualities; many of his poetic images have a double function, describing a landscape feature and anthropomorphizing it at the same time. The chief image of this sort, of course, is the weeping willow (liu), which had become a commonplace metaphor in both elite and popular cultures for beautiful women. Thus, words like liuyao (willow-branch waist) and liumei (willow-leaf eyebrows) describe fine female features; liuyao (tender as willow) and liuruo (fragile as willow) characterize exaggerated femininity; liusi (willow strands) is a pun on xiangsi, a woman's lovesickness; and liuxu (willow catkins) sometimes alludes to an intellectual lady. Within this literary and linguistic tradition, the ambiguity in Yongzheng's poem must have been deliberate. The poem's real subject is neither willows nor women, but the feminization of place. Thus the subtle movement of willow branches seems to belong to the one who gently lays her brush on an inkstone and plays her lute; the willows' nocturnal shadow conceals the fragrance of her books. The woman is unidentified; what matters is that her images and sensibility characterize the site.

Other poems in the series encourage such a reading. Following the verses on the Reading Hall, the second poem is subtitled "The Bamboo Cloister" ("Zhuzi yuan").
had to reject any association with masculinity and to transfer conventional male symbols into a female domain.\textsuperscript{20} A number of factors link Yongzheng’s screen and the poetry series into a single historical context. In terms of place, both were directly associated with the Yuanming Garden. In terms of time, both were created when Yongzheng was still a prince. In terms of authorship, Yongzheng not only wrote the poems but also took part in the paintings’ creation. Although the women and other pictorial images on the screen must have been done by a skilled court painter, Yongzheng inscribed almost all the calligraphy appearing inside the women’s painted rooms, including two poetry scrolls signed with his own sobriquets (Figs. 12.8c, k) and perhaps also copies of masterpieces by Mi Fu and Dong Qichang in the boudoir (Figs. 12.8f, i).\textsuperscript{21} He thus assumed the roles of both patron and co-artist. As patron, he commissioned the screen and installed it in one of his rooms. As co-artist, he integrated his calligraphy into the paintings’ overall design. By cleverly inscribing wall spaces in the boudoir and by deliberately leaving part of an inscription outside the picture frame, his writing contributed to the coherence of the pictorial composition rather than challenging it.

The most convincing evidence for the interrelationship between the poetry series and the painted screen, however, is found in their shared subject and imagery. Although Yongzheng titled his poetry series “Twelve Songs on the Garden’s Scenic Spots” and specified the subject of each poem, he offered few physical clues to the actual sites he claimed to describe. Instead, he was motivated by a strong desire to feminize these places in two complementary ways. His first method was to substitute a particular plant for the site and to describe the plant as if it were a woman. Thus, the willow trees surrounding the Reading Hall have “floating strands gently brushing against an inkstone,” and the bamboo in the garden’s Bamboo Cloister wears “jade girdles [that] give forth a tinkling sound.” The second method was to center the poetic imagination on an elusive female figure, who seems to occupy the site and whose appearance, activity, and mood seem to give the site a distinctive personality. Thus, a woman seems to be sitting in “The Wutong Cloister” (“Wutong yuan”) and waiting for moonrise; another woman (or the same woman?) in “The Peach Blossom Dock” (“Taohua wu”) is brightened by peach flowers after an early spring snow.

Fig. 12.9 Anonymous, Reading Hall Deep Inside Willow Trees (the topmost group of buildings), in the Yuanming Garden. 18th century. Woodcut print. Reprinted from Yuzhi yuanmingsu yuyong (Pictures of the Yuanming Garden with poems by Emperor Yongzheng [Shijiazhuan: Hebei meishu chubanshe, 1979]).

\begin{quote}
A stream winds into a deep courtyard.
A corridor turns into a bamboo-flanked path.
Their jade girdles give forth a tinkling sound;
Gracefully they play with the clear breeze.
Their fragrance penetrates book covers;
Their cool shade protects patterned window gratings.
So elegant, fine, and beautiful—
Yet they determine to flourish only in harsh winter.
\end{quote}

Significantly, here the bamboo—a traditional symbol for loyal ministers and pure literati—is likened to a secluded woman who is at once beautiful, faithful, and well read (again, books are mentioned). It seems that in being anthropomorphized, the prince’s private garden
Both methods were used to create Yongzheng's painted screen as well: each composition is centered on an anonymous lady, and her femininity is enhanced by the physical environment. In some cases, individual poems and paintings even form interreferential "pairs." I have cited "The Bamboo Cloister," in which the evergreen bamboo alludes to an elegant and secluded woman. On one of the screen's twelve panels (Fig. 12.8g), a cluster of lush bamboo half-blocks the entrance to a deep courtyard, and a woman is emerging from behind the doorway. The tall bamboo stems frame the picture on the right; the slender female figure holds the door frame to the left. Their symmetrical placement and echoing relationship imply semantic interchangeability. A similar equation between a plant and a female figure also characterizes other painted panels of the screen. In one case, a lady is sitting beside a large wutong tree, whose broad leaves form a canopy for her. Through the moon-gate behind the woman, we see piles of books and a rectangular gate in the distance; both gates have unique blush frames not seen in other panels (Fig. 12.8i). With these features, this scene seems to be related to the third poem in the series. Titled "The Wutong Cloister," the poem includes these lines: "Chanting in the wind, the sound of leaves passes the turquoise chamber. / Waiting for moonrise, she is seated in a wutong pavilion." On another screen panel (Fig. 12.8b), a woman sewing in her room gazes at two lotus blossoms on a single stem outside her window. Called bingdi lian in Chinese, this anomaly is a famous symbol for romantic love. The theme of love (conveyed also by other pictorial images such as the two goldfish swimming under lotus leaves) is the topic of Yongzheng's poem, "The Lotus Pond" ("Lianhua chi"):  

Casting their double reflections on deep or shallow water;  
Their joint fragrance is so enchanting...  
Please do not break the lotus leaves when collecting flowers,  
Save them to shade the pair of love birds.

Strong parallels again link other poems and paintings. In his verses on "The Peach Blossom Dock," Yongzheng described peachflowers as "crimson snow" that covers a lady's chamber and brightens her clothes. A screen panel (Fig. 12.8j) depicts a chilly day after a light snow. Bamboo leaves have turned white, and a woman in a fur hat is warming herself by a charcoal stove. Only a blossoming peach branch discloses spring's arrival. Hanging down from the eaves, its abundant pink and white flowers indeed invoke the image of "crimson snow." In contrast to this winter picture, another screen panel offers a summer scene (Fig. 12.8a): a large hexagonal window on a rose trellis separates a beautiful woman from us, the onlookers. She leans against layered ornamental rocks and looks out the window. Following her gaze, we find beautiful peony flowers in the foreground. Coupled with layered rocks, their white, pink, and purple petals echo the colors of the lady's face and dress. The whole picture seems to be illustrating Yongzheng's poem "The Peony Chamber" ("Mudan shi"):  

Layered clouds pile up these elegant rocks.  
A winding stream surrounds and passes the Peony Chamber.  
Without equal under Heaven,  
Surely you are the world's supreme flower.  
So voluptuous Shi Chong should have favored you.  
So world-famous that you should have dominated Luoyang.  
Who can stand next to you, the National Beauty?  
Five-colored clouds make up your immortal garments.

Such comparisons do more than just demonstrate a common subject matter and imagery. They reveal a shared intention in forging a feminine space in both the "Twelve Songs on the Garden's Scenic Spots" and the screen of twelve beauties. In both cases, not only is a woman presented as the subject of the male gaze, but she belongs to (and dissolves into) a feminized landscape, in which flowers and plants reflect her radiance and luxury, and mirrors and screens reveal her loneliness and sorrow. This relationship between art and literature was not new, of course. In fact, we can trace this relationship back to the beginning of both literary and artistic representations of meiren. We also find that two principal persona of meiren provided the foci of imagining and constructing feminine space in art and literature. The earlier persona is a palace lady (sometimes also identified as a goddess), whose desolate boudoir is tirelessly described in the New Songs from a Jade Terrace, a poem collection compiled by Xu Ling (507–83) in 545 A.D. The most important feature of this boudoir is its perceptual isolation. In Anne Birrell's words, it is always presented "as a closed erotic world. The normal elements of a lady's daily life, such as servants, children, friends, family, and, most important, her husband or lover, are pruned away from the scenario. In the full flowering of the
love poetry of this era woman becomes confined to symbolic isolation in her luxury boudoir” (Birrell, 11–12). Nevertheless, the poet’s roving eye could peep into this sealed place, surveying with minute attention all the bodily features and material belongings of a nameless palace lady.

This enclosed inner palace became the subject of numerous paintings from the Tang onward. Ellen Johnston Laing has concluded that, like palace-style poetry, these pictures focus on a lovesick woman whose one-sided love affair leaves her “eternally pining or waiting for an absent, never-to-return lover” (Laing, 287). Although such palace ladies would continue to fascinate Chinese audiences throughout the country’s long history, the second “beautiful woman” persona—the courtesan/concubine (again sometimes identified as a goddess)—began to dominate pictorial representations of feminine space from the middle and late Ming dynasty. Courtesans and concubines can be grouped together because, as James Cahill has observed, they could move smoothly from the one role to the other and back again—“Like fish and dragon as a category of painting subjects, since each transforms into the other.”

The iconography of the palace lady and her boudoir was fully utilized in depicting idealized courtesans and concubines, but new visual codes were also invented to express a different kind of sensibility. Like a palace lady, the woman in a “courtesan-concubine” painting is nameless and often appears in an opulent interior or a garden setting. She may be engaged in leisurely activities, but more frequently she is alone, either looking at her own reflection in a mirror or gazing at a pair of cats, birds, or butterflies. In both cases, the subtext is that she, as an “amorous beauty,” is thinking about an absent lover and suffering from “spring longing” (chunsi). Differing from a portrayal of a palace lady, however, a “courtesan-concubine” picture often delivers a bolder erotic message. Although the painted woman rarely exhibits her sexuality openly, her sexual allure and accessibility are represented through certain gestures (such as touching her cheek and toy ing with her belt) and sexual symbols (such as particular kinds of flowers, fruits, and objects) that a Ming or Qing spectator would have had no difficulty understanding. Laing first brought people’s attention to such images in her paper “Amorous Beauty or Allof Nymph: A Study of Qiu Ying’s Beauty in Spring Thought.”

Cahill has identified more “coded” images and further linked, convincingly in my opinion, these images (and their creators and viewers) to the "courtesan culture" that flourished in the cities in the Yangzi Delta region during the middle and late Ming; he thus extended existing scholarship on this culture to include its artistic production. Among the several important consequences of this southern courtesan culture is a particular brand of romance between “genius and beauty” (caizi jiaren), exemplified by the legendary love affairs between Qian Qianyi and Liu Rushi in real life, and between Hou Fangyu and Li Xiangjun in the famous drama The Peach Blossom Fan, completed by Kong Shangren in 1699 (see Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chambers, 252–56; Wakeman, “Romantics, Stoics, and Martyrs,” 632–39; Kang-i Sun Chang, Ch’ên Ts’ai-lung, 9–40).

Yongzheng’s “Screen of Twelve Beauties” (Figs. 12.8a–I) clearly continues this tradition of beautiful woman painting. In fact, it combines portrayals of lonely palace ladies and glamorous courtesans. There are enough details, such as the opulent interior and frequent pairs of animals, insects, and birds, to indicate the screen’s debt to courtesan-concubine painting. (Indeed, according to Cahill, the screen may have been painted by Zhang Zhen, who began his career as a professional painter in Suzhou, a major center of southern courtesan culture.) On the other hand, we should also remember that this screen belonged to an imperial garden; it thus naturally associated itself with well-known palace lady themes such as “Spring Morning in the Han Palace” (“Han gong chunxiao”). These connections with traditional “beautiful woman” paintings, however, only raise questions about the screen’s real meaning. Why did the images of Chinese ladies so strongly attract the Manchu lord? Why were so many similar pictures of beautiful Chinese women also created in the Qing court under imperial patronage? After all, who were these lovesick women in the eyes of the Manchu patrons? Zhu Jiajin’s discovery of the archive disproves the old assumption that these are portraits of Yongzheng’s twelve consorts, since a consort’s portrait in the Qing court was always labeled an “auspicious visage” (xiong) or a “place of a mistress” (zhuwei); it was never called meiren, a term that refers to an ideal and often fictional beauty. But can we then conclude that these images represented idealized courtesans or royal concubines, as they had been represented in traditional Chinese painting?

In my opinion, it would be too simplistic to consider images on Yongzheng’s screen a natural outgrowth of the traditional beautiful woman genre and to equate this screen created in the Qing court with works produced in a native Chinese context. This is not only because
the southern courtesan culture declined during the early Qing: the famous pleasure district in Nanjing was completely destroyed at the beginning of the dynasty, and by 1673 the Qing court had formally ended the century-long system of official prostitutes throughout the country. More important, once the art of beautiful woman painting was transposed from its original cultural context into the Forbidden City, now occupied by rulers of a non-Chinese origin, it was appreciated for different reasons and given additional significance. To better understand Yongzheng’s “Screen of Twelve Beauties,” therefore, we must situate it in the context of Qing court art and compare it with other female images created in the Forbidden City.

Based on his study of the Qing archives, Yang Boda has proposed that the Qianlong emperor exercised tight control over court painters, especially when they were assigned the responsibility of portraying members of the imperial household, including female members such as the empress dowager, the empress, royal consorts, and princesses. A court artist had to follow a set of strict codes, and “only after inspection and approval of a preliminary version was the painter permitted to officially undertake the full painting” (Yang Boda, “Development,” 335). Earlier rulers must have exercised similar control, since royal portraits from the courts of Kangxi and Yongzheng demonstrate a consistently rigid formula. Anyone comparing such an official portrait (Fig. 12.10) and the women on Yongzheng’s “Screen of Twelve Beauties” (Figs. 12.8a-I) would be startled by their radical differences. The portrait, called rong or “visage,” was official in status and ceremonial in function. Works of this type uniformly employ a pictorial style that rejects any depiction of physical environment, bodily movement, or facial expression. It is true that some of the royal portraits convey a greater sense of personality whereas others reveal a stronger impact of European modeling techniques, but none of them violates the basic codes of the genre: as a formal portrait, a “visage” picture must present an empress or royal consort in a perfect frontal view against an empty background. The women are reduced to nearly identical puppets, whose major role is to display their Manchu-style fur hats and jackets with embroidered imperial dragons as symbols of their ethnic and political identity.

The heavy emphasis on official costumes in these visage portraits attests to the Qing emperors’ strong concern with their identity. From the beginning of the dynasty, these non-Chinese rulers attached great importance to their native costumes, rejecting all suggestions that they
should now dress in Chinese-style clothes in order to demonstrate their mandate to rule China (Chen Juanjuan, 83–84). The reason for this insistence was simple: the Manchu costumes identified their origin and ethnic superiority. In fact, if Qing rulers were willing to borrow anything from Chinese culture (and they indeed borrowed quite a lot), three things—surname, hairstyle, and clothes—must be exceptions. Beijing’s Palace Museum now houses numerous clothes worn by Qing court ladies from the seventeenth century onward, but to my knowledge no Chinese-style dresses have been found. This absence is understandable: beginning with the dynasty’s founder, Huangtaiji, each ruler issued threatening documents prohibiting all Banner members—whether Manchu, Mongol, or Chinese—from wearing Chinese clothes. The following passage is from an edict issued by the Jiaqing emperor in 1804, more than one and a half centuries after the founding of the dynasty:

Costume is an important matter related to the tradition of the state and the mind of citizens. I therefore order you, the Commander-in-chiefs and Vice Commander-in-chiefs of both Manchu armies and Han armies in all Eight Banners, to pay great attention, finding out whether there are girls who wear clothes with freely expanded wide sleeves, and whether there are girls who even follow the Chinese costume of having their feet bound. Once you locate such unlawful youths, you must immediately impeach their parents, punishing them according to the legal codes for criminals who disobey government regulations. If after education they still cannot practice the right way and regain their old habit, once I find out this or receive letters of appeal, I will definitely punish them severely, together with the Commander-in-chief and Secretary of their Banner. I will never relent! (Tuojin 1813, juan 400)

We thus come to realize a profound irony in Yongzheng’s Twelve Beauties and other Qing court depictions of beautiful women: what was presented was actually forbidden, since all the painted ladies are dressed in traditional Chinese costumes and surround themselves with rich symbols and visual allusions from traditional Chinese culture. It seems that the stern official regulation only stimulated the policymakers’ private interest in the things they were publicly prohibiting. It is this private interest in the “Chineseness” and exoticism of beautiful women and their world, I would propose, that was responsible for the popularity and proliferation of their images in the Qing court. Only because of this interest and support from the highest patrons could beautiful woman painting develop into a powerful subgenre in court art and could the fantasy of an alien Chinese feminine space be sustained for close to a century.

The original connections between this artistic genre and the glamorous southern culture were not forgotten; but it nourished a different sort of imagination. The feminine space represented on Yongzheng’s screen (as well as in other beautiful woman paintings from the Qing court) was given a broad symbolic significance, pertaining to an imaginary south (i.e., China) with all its charm and exoticism, its literature and art, its famous beauties and legendary gardens, and its vulnerability as the consequence of its excessive refinement. In the eyes of the Manchu conquerors, who came from the north and maintained their headquarters in the north, all the attractions of Chinese culture—its exquisiteness as well as its submissiveness—made it an extended, allegorical feminine space that stirred up fantasy and invited conquest. Yongzheng’s “Screen of Twelve Beauties” was not the first work that represented Chinese culture as a feminine space. His father, the Kangxi emperor, had already established this symbolic connection: a screen created under his patronage, now in Beijing’s Palace Museum, portrays a group of Chinese ladies in a dream-like southern landscape; on the back of the screen the emperor himself inscribed Zhang Xie’s (fl. 295 A.D.) “Rhapsody on the Spring Festival at the Luo River”—a prose-poem on an ancient Chinese capital in the south (Fig. 12.11).

Yongzheng was also not the last Qing ruler to imbue images of Chinese meiren with political meaning; on this matter he was obediently followed by his son and heir, the Qianlong emperor. In one of Qianlong’s portraits titled “Emperor Qianlong Merrymaking” (“Qianlong xingle tu”), the Manchu ruler had himself portrayed in a pavilion, looking down at five young women dressed in traditional Chinese clothes, who are crossing a bridge escorted by a royal procession (Fig. 12.12). Qianlong’s inscription on the painting contains these two stanzas:

Relaxing in the pavilion over a clear stream,
I hear my alert attendants pass on a message:
“New royal consorts are arriving!”
—Isn’t this scene better than the picture of Lady Zhaojun
leaving China for the north?

Having frequented immortal realms,
Now I just lean against the railing, quiet and relaxed.
Although people's caps and robes follow the Han style,
What you see are images of deep meaning in a painting.

To my knowledge, this is the only statement by a Qing ruler about the fictional and symbolic nature of the beautiful-women images in Qing court art: these are not real persons, but are "images of deep meaning." Qianlong revealed their meaning by comparing these painted Chinese beauties to Wang Zhaojun, a famous palace lady of the Han dynasty who was sent as a gift to a Xiongnu king north of the

Great Wall. Although this allusion implies China's submission to an alien ruler, Qianlong was more satisfied with himself ("Isn't this scene better than the picture of Lady Zhaojun leaving China for the north?"); he, though non-Chinese in origin and also from the north, had conquered China and become its master.

The beautiful-women painting in the Qing court, therefore, also reinvented the genius-and-beauty romance, which, as mentioned above, was a by-product of Ming courtesan culture. During the Qing, when such romances had become a common theme of novels and plays, a story about an alleged love affair between the Shunzhi emperor (r. 1644-61) and the courtesan Dong Xiaoyuan circulated (Wang Shunu, 211-15). Although this and similar stories resulted from transporting genius-and-beauty romance into the Manchu court, paintings such as "Emperor Qianlong Merrymaking" and Yongzheng's "Screen of Twelve Beauties" prove that Manchu lords may have encouraged this development or may even have invented a "love affair" with Chinese beauties themselves.

In the "Screen of Twelve Beauties," none of the Chinese women smiles; their melancholy expressions reflect their inner suffering from "spring longing" for an absent lover. This supposed lover must be the future emperor Yongzheng. We know this for a number of reasons. Most obvious, although Yongzheng is not depicted in the paintings, his calligraphy and signatures stand for him. That his writing and
seals decorate the ladies' boudoirs implies that he is the master of this imaginary, illusionistic feminine space and its twelve exotic and lovesick women. These women were originally painted on the twelve panels of a *tweiping* screen that "surrounded" Yongzheng's seat or couch. The women's longing thus had a shared focus and a concrete aim: the empty seat or couch is a constant and crude reminder of their lover's absence. Among these beauties, one woman is lost in deep thought reading a book (Fig. 12.8i). When I began my research on the screen I was eager to know the content of the book, but no reproduction of the picture was clear enough to reveal the passages on the open page. Thanks to the curators in the Palace Museum, I was able to study the original painting in the summer of 1993. Printed on the page is a love song (Fig. 12.13):

Sir, please don't treasure too much your gold-thread
gown;
Please cling to the moment when you are young,
Cut the flowers when they are blooming and offering
themselves to you;
Don't wait to cut a branch till all the flowers are gone.

Significantly, this is a Tang courtesan's song for her lover.† Yongzheng is therefore restaging a typical genius-and-beauty drama between a courtesan and a scholar: his genius is indicated by his handsome calligraphy; her talent and beauty are clinched by her charming image and the book in her hand. She is waiting for him. But it is also clear that in this case neither is he merely a young calligrapher nor is she simply a beautiful courtesan. He is not only a lover (of the beauty, her space, and her culture) but also conqueror and master (of the beauty, her space, and her culture). On the other hand, concealed in the imperial garden and contrasted with the stiff portraits of Manchú ladies, she was, above all, a "Chinese" beauty: an alien or Other. All her passivity, subordination, and suffering thus gained overt political significance: the possession of her and her space fulfilled not only a private fantasy but also a desire to exercise power over a defeated culture and nation.

This chapter began by questioning the concept of "stereotype" in art and literature: Can a highly formulated image such as the twelve beauties imply anything momentary and personal—anything beyond shared conventions—to signify a particular subjectivity? This question, of course, dwells on a paradox: How can individualism and in-

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Fig. 12.13 Detail of Fig. 8i.
and events into “bare bones” themes (gu), only to be fleshed out again—in poetry, novel, and painting (Xiangyan congshu, 1:8).

The intimate connections between such manuals of stereotypical beauties and representations of women in contemporary literature and art are therefore not surprising. The act of fleshing out the former into the latter—to create female characters based on the standardized features of a beauty, to connect itemized female activities into a continuous narrative, and to install isolated figures into specific environments—is a matter of artistic reinvention. The images or stories resulting from this process no longer just index collective ideals. Although still following the general iconography of beautiful women, their links with the artist or the patron are often private and circumstantial. In this sense, both Cao Xueqin’s Twelve Golden Hairpins of Jinling and Yongzheng’s Twelve Beauties in the Yuanming Garden rely on a stereotypical conception of feminine space, but both also go beyond stereotypes. The difference between these two sets of twelve beauties is that they transcend conventions in different and even opposite ways. I have tried to capture their semiotic symmetry by analyzing them in the first and third sections of this chapter, around the “core” of the standardized formulation of beautiful women.

Readers familiar with the Dream of the Red Chamber can hardly miss its many parallels with the contemporary meiren manuals, even though only a tiny portion of these manuals is introduced in this essay. It is impossible to investigate here how Cao Xueqin fleshed out bare-bones themes (e.g., “Watching flowers falling and thinking about life’s emptiness,” “Commenting on a book from her lover with [colors of] fallen petals,” and so on) into events and episodes in his novel. But we may briefly review his several feminine spaces, which echo one another and transform into one another, blurring the boundaries between myth, dream, and reality. In this way they constitute a fictional universe as the subject of imagination and storytelling. Cao Xueqin’s perception of this universe owes much to the iconography of meiren, but this universe belongs to only one man—his alter ego, Baoyu (Precious Stone).

The novel begins with a fable about a (platonic) love affair between Stone (the former incarnation of Baoyu) and a heavenly flower. It tells that long ago Heaven fell and the Goddess Nuwa made five-colored stones from ordinary rocks to repair the damage. One of these stones was left unused. Having been transformed by the goddess, he assumed human form and even possessed qing or passion. He wandered around; “most of his time he spent west of Sunset Glow exploring the banks of the Magic River. There, by the Rock of Rebirth, he found the beautiful Crimson Pearl Flower, for which he conceived such a fancy that he took to watering her every day with sweet dew, thereby conferring on her the gift of life.” Deeply grateful, Crimson Pearl decided to be reborn in the mortal world (as Daiyu) to repay Stone with the tears she would shed in her lifetime. “Because of this strange affair,” it is told, “Disenchantment has got together a group of amorous young souls, of which Crimson Pearl is one, and intends to send them down into the world to take part in the great illusion of human life” (Hawkes and Minford, 1:53). These “young souls” are the Twelve Golden Hairpins.

(Had Cao Xueqin read Wei Yong’s “Following One’s Affinity,” published by Zhang Chao in his influential Collectanea of Contemporary Writings? In the opening section of this essay, entitled “Delight in Adornment,” Wei told his readers that a true gentleman must be extremely dedicated to his meiren. “A beauty is a flower’s true self,” he claims. Again, “the place where a beauty lives is like a flower bed or vase. Located north of the Pavilion of Gru-wood, encircled by the Railing of a Hundred Treasures—it must have been the former home of the Heavenly Flower Bud” (Xiangyang congshu, 1:69.)

The Twelve Golden Hairpins reappear in Baoyu’s dream in chapter 5. As I recount above, when they are found in the female inner court of the Land of Illusion, their garden is filled with “deliciously fragrant fairy blooms and rare aromatic herbs”; their buildings have “ornately carved and painted eaves and rafters, their doorways and windows adorned with strings of pearls”; and their rooms are furnished with “musical instruments, antique bronzes, paintings by old masters, and poems by new poets.” (One finds all these images in meiren manuals as well as in contemporary beautiful woman paintings [Figs. 12.6–8].) Again, Baoyu is the only male visitor to this “pure, maidenly precinct.”

But, mainly, the story of Cao Xueqin’s twelve beauties takes place in the Prospect Garden, which is itself an enormously enlarged version of the inner court in the Land of Illusion. The garden is built for the homecoming of Yuanchun, a daughter of the Jia family who has become an imperial consort. Since she does not want to see this beautiful garden wasted after she returns to the palace (which she refers to
spent in Nanjing (before the confiscation of his family estates) must have recurred in his dreams and inspired his writing. Many authors have thus devoted themselves to discovering Cao Xueqin’s autobiography in his novel. Many of these discoveries are important, but they should not blur the basic understanding that his Twelve Beauties, so much praised for their “realistic” qualities, mix conventions and fantasies with intimate familiarity. For one thing, they are all dressed in traditional Chinese costume, but as Manchu Bannermen with the status of bond servant (Manchu bói), the Caos must have worn Manchu clothes according to the dynasty’s regulations. The Twelve Beauties thus both confirm a stereotype and transcend it. When Cao Xueqin’s friends were reading his manuscript, they talked about his “dream of the south.” Indeed, the south is also a stereotype. In the eighteenth century, it denoted everything related to an old Chinese culture. But it was also Cao Xueqin’s former home.

Dressed in Chinese clothes and surrounded by Chinese symbols, Yongzheng’s Twelve Beauties also pertain to the south and the Chinese cultural tradition. But these portraits were commissioned by a Manchu prince; what they symbolized, as I have tried to prove, was a defeated nation that was given an image of an extended feminine space with all its charm, exoticism, and vulnerability. Consequently, the conventional meiren image was further exaggerated: she was multiplied and her passivity was stressed. The reinvention of meiren was also realized by installing standardized female images into a specific context: the Twelve Beauties were painted on a screen that once belonged to the Yuanming Yuan. The changing significance of the garden thus determined the fate of the Twelve Beauties.

The three sobriquets that Yongzheng signed within these images reveal his frame of mind at the time of the paintings’ creation. One of these, Master of the Yuanming Yuan, identifies the garden (as well as its belongings including the painted screen) as his private property. Another, Heaven Inside a Bottle, is borrowed from Daoist vocabulary and refers to a transcendent paradise within a tight physical enclosure. This second name actually designated one of the Yuanming Garden’s buildings; but in a broad sense Heaven Inside a Bottle pertained to the whole garden—from ancient times, Chinese rulers were accustomed to construct their gardens as paradise on earth.31 Yongzheng’s third sobriquet most explicitly indicates the place of the screen’s creation: in calling himself A Retired Gentleman Who Breaks
Away From the Dusty World, he must have been inscribing the screen away from his office and worldly duties.

These three sobriquets, therefore, imply a fundamental dualism in the self-identity of the future emperor: his status as the Master of the Yuanming Garden opposed (and was supported by) his role as the head of the Palace of Prince Yong (Yong wangfu), a huge residential and administrative compound inside the walled city of Beijing. If the garden was compared to a transcendent paradise (i.e., Heaven Inside a Bottle), the palace had to be identified with solid “earth.” And, of course, this ambitious prince never “broke away from the dusty world”; in fact, when the screen was made and set up in the Yuanming yuán, he was busily scheming to take over the throne. Yongzheng’s dualistic self-identity determined the symbolism of the garden: the Yuanming yuán was imagined to be a place of privacy, relaxation, reclusion, and immortality only because it had a worldly counterpart that stood for public life, social engagement, and political undertaking. Once this dualism was cast in the light of gender (which functioned as a powerful conceptual category in ordering natural and human phenomena, and as a prominent trope to be deployed in any kind of rhetoric), the Yuanming yuán was logically identified with a conceptual feminine space and had to be transformed into a concrete feminine space. This transformation was realized in art—in architecture and landscaping, as well as in literature and interior decoration. This is how we are left with Yongzheng’s “Twelve Songs on the Garden’s Scenic Spots” and the twelve painted beauties from his screen.

This symbolism of the Yuanming yuán, however, altered somewhat after Yongzheng became emperor. In 1725, three years after he ascended the throne, he constructed a series of official buildings—an audience hall, magnificent palatial gates, and offices—inside the Yuanming yuán, where he was to hold court most of the year. The garden was no longer an entirely private feminine space but came to be characterized by an internal dualism. The emperor still periodically (re)visited the Reading Hall Deep Inside Weeping Willows and wrote more poems there, but the central theme of these writings had become a pursuit for idle relaxation. His earlier fantasy involving some imaginary exotic “Chinese” beauties gradually faded; most portraits he commissioned after he became the emperor represent himself in various disguises (see Wu “Emperor’s Masquerade”). Ten years after he became the Son of Heaven, he learned that the twelve painted beauties had been removed from the screen in the Reading Hall. He did not order them restored, but demanded only they be preserved in a dark storage room.

Interestingly and ironically, Yongzheng was the man who crushed the Cao family. The year his Twelve Beauties were sent into storage, Cao Xueqin reached adulthood and probably began to dream about his own Twelve Beauties and their garden.
Chapter 12

1. "[Vanitas] changed the title of the book from The Story of the Stone to The Tale of Brother Amor." Old Kong Meixi from the homeland of Confucius called the book A Mirror for the Romantic. Wu Yufeng called it A Dream of Golden Days. Cao Xueqin in his Nostalgia Studio worked on it for ten years in the course of which he rewrote it no less than five times, dividing it into chapters, composing chapter headings, renaming it The Twelve Beauties of Ling, and adding an introductory quatrains (Hawkes and Minford, 1: 51).

2. For the symbolism of the gate, see Wu, "Transparent Stone."

3. For the origin and the political symbolism of this architectural design, see Wu, "From Temple to Tomb", and idem, "Tiananmen Square."

4. Cao Xueqin called these offices peidian (flanking halls), which certainly implies a central hall.

5. Nie Chongzheng, a scholar in Beijing’s Palace Museum and an authority on Qing court painting, believes that some principal images in the murals, such as cranes and animals, must have been by Castiglione himself. Since Castiglione died before Qianlong reconstructed the imperial palace, Nie further suggests that these murals, which were painted on silk mounted on walls, may have been removed from an earlier building. It is known that Castiglione created some illusionistic wall paintings for Qianlong. It is possible that the emperor, a great supporter of Castiglione’s art, would have relocated them to the palace where he spent his last years (Nie, "Architectural Decoration.")

6. For Wei Yong’s life and publications, see Yong Rong, 1129; Zhang Huihui, 571, 661. One of his compilations is Secrets in a Pillow (Zhenzhuang mi), which includes "Delight in Adornment." I thank Judith Zeitlin and Ma Tai-lai of the University of Chicago for providing me with these sources.

7. For illustrations, see Zhongguo gu dai shu hua tu mu, vol. 4, Hu 1-2057, vol. 7, Su 24-0707.

8. Li Suiju lived during the late Ming and early Qing. Some of his activities are recorded in Zhang Huihui, 550, 571.

9. The book is also known as A Collection of Talented Women (Nicaizi ji), Beautiful Stories of Young Maidsens (Guixiu jianhua), A Supplement to “History of Love” (Qingshi xizhuan). Xu Zhen frequently used the title Meiren shu in the book and also subtitled the book’s preface “A Register of Beauties” (Meiren pu). For the date of the book, see Zhongguo tongshu xiaoshuo zongmu tian, 330-31. According to Zhong Fei, this book must have been completed, or nearly completed, by 1659. It was probably first published during the Shunzhi or Kangxi period and was reprinted during the Qianlong and Daoguang periods.


11. This album is in the Shanghai Art Museum; for the illustrations, see Zhongguo gudai shu hua tu mu, vol. 4, Hu 1-2821.

12. Entitled “Stories of Virtuous Queens of the Successive Dynasties” (“Lidai xianhou gushi tu”), this album is in Beijing’s Palace Museum and is reproduced in Palace Museum, Gugong mubanlun, pl. 2.

13. This album is reproduced in Palace Museum, Gugong mubanlun, pl. 1. Hongli or the future Qianlong emperor received the title Prince Bao in 1733. This album, therefore, must have been made after this date. Although most books introduce Jiao Bingzhen as a court painter active in the Kangxi period, he must have continued to serve in the Yongzheng emperor’s court. In addition to the album, a portrait of Zhang Dadian in the Beijing Administration of Cultural Relics (dated to 1726) was made by Jiao Bingzhen during the Yongzheng reign. See Liu Wanlang, 146.

14. For a brief discussion of the “linear method,” see Nie Chongzheng, “Xianfahua xiaekao.” For a brief introduction to Jiao Bingzhen and his activities, see Rosenzweig, 149-67; Yang Boda, Qingdai yuanshua.

15. Qianlong must have greatly enjoyed this album. He not only twice stamped its pages with his various seals, but also personally ordered it copied as a set of ivory carvings. See Museum Boymans-van Beuningen Rotterdam, 160-61.

16. For a brief biography of Su Zhikun, see Luo Kehan, 894. I thank Ma Tai-lai for providing me with this and other biographical references.

17. I thank Yang Chengbin and Shi Yuchun, two former colleagues and members of the Palace Museum’s Painting and Calligraphy Division, who recalled the 1950 inventory in our private conversations in 1993.

18. After their rediscovery, these paintings were mounted as hanging scrolls.

19. Yongzheng’s poetry collection contains some fifty poems related to the Yuanming yuan; three of them are specifically about the Reading Hall Deep Inside Weeping Willows. He wrote on other sites in the garden only once or twice. See Zhu Jiajin and Li Yangqin.

20. We should note, however, that a female figure “matched” with bamboo is not unique to this painting. An earlier example is a Song painting in the collection of Beijing’s Palace Museum (Palace Museum, Lidai shinihua xuani, pl. 9).

21. Among the sons of the Kangxi emperor, Yinzhen was well-known for his imitations of ancient calligraphy; see Feng Erkang, 10.

22. James Cahill, lectures on female images in later Chinese painting, delivered at the University of Southern California in 1994. I thank him for providing me not only with his lecture drafts but also with materials he prepared for a course on Chinese paintings of women at U. C. Berkeley.

23. Paper delivered at the symposium Genres in Chinese Painting at the
Chapter 13

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1. See Zhao Botao. For a discussion of Gu's many names, see Hu Wenkai, 800.
2. For biographical information on Wang Duanshu, see Hu Wenkai, 248-50; Zhong Huiling, 278-95; Yu Jianhua, 121; Zou Siyi; and Deng Hanyi.
3. Wang Duanshu, Yinmeng ji, biography section.
4. See, e.g., Zhang, 315, for a biography of a Nanjing beggar, which appears in the biography section of Yinmeng ji. A note there expresses Wang's pleasure that Zhang published this and others of her biographies.
5. The drinking with Wu Shan is described in a poem by Wang to Wu; see Yinmeng ji, seven-word regulated verse, shang, 12a-b.
6. The matching of wits is described in Yu Jianhua, 121. For Qin Qianyi's comment, see his preface to Wang Duanshu, Mingyuan shiwei. For the comment on wittiness, see Deng Hanyi.
8. I used the edition in the Beijing University Library.
9. See Wang Duanshu, Mingyuan shiwei, "Fanli."
10. For the date 1700, see Zhang Huijian, 924.
11. Contemporary library catalogues list a few other examples in the intervening 163 years, but these works appear not to have circulated far or been widely known. Indeed even the few that can be found were compiled no more than one generation after Wang Duanshu. See, e.g., Gui Shifen's Gujin mingyuan bishu shiyou of 1685 (Hu Wenkai, 784).
12. See note 22 below.
13. On Hou, see Hu Wenkai, 411. Hou was considerably older than Wang. She was close to certain of Yuan Mei's disciples, such as Jiang Zha; Wang was close to others, such as Xi Peilan.
14. Despite tans's irregular publishing history, they were of great interest to women readers throughout the Qing. Even if, as is sometimes claimed, the early Qing Tan yu hua's author was Xu Zhibo, a man and not a woman, he is said to have written it to entertain his mother (see Xiong Deji). For more on Tan yu hua, see Zheng Zhenduo, 370-72; Toyoko Yoshida Chen, 52-177; and Hu Siao-chen.
15. On Ai tiang, see Wang Chongmin, 9.
16. Among Wang Duan's literary accompances, Cao Zhenxiu was another who associated with non-Chinese. Her husband, Wang Qisan (1755-1818), was a close acquaintance of a Mongol, Fa-shi-shan (1753-1813), and