

Family as a Starting Point: The Kinship-Based Female Poetry Clubs Between Late
Ming and Early Qing Dynasties, 1550-1700

by

Yuxuan Cai

B.A. (Honours), in Asian Language & Culture, University of British Columbia, 2018

B.A., University of Manitoba, 2016

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University of Victoria

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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Poetry clubs composed of gentry women began to emerge during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. The earliest female poetry clubs in this period were all kinship-based and organized within gentry families. This phenomenon shows that family was the major source for the foundation of female poetry clubs. The aim of this research is to investigate the impact of family on the formation of kinship-based female poetry clubs from a political, social, and cultural perspective and to examine these clubs within the context of geographical location, family learning and marriage relationships. This thesis treats the Mingyuan Poetry Club founded by female members of the Fang family in Tongcheng city, Anhui province as the main focus of research to illustrate the family's influence on the formation of gentry women poetry clubs by translating and analyzing the members' poetic works and family life.

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Dedication

To my dearest Mom & Dad and my cutest pets, Yuanbao and Liuyi,
who always support me with sincerity and kindness.

Family as a Starting Point: The Kinship-Based Female Poetry Clubs Between Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties, 1550-1700

Chapter 1: Introduction

During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1912), apart from the emperors' concubines, almost all of the women recorded in the official historical records—*History of the Ming* (1739) and *The Draft History of the Qing* (1928)—were praised for their chastity and female virtue. According to statistics, there are over 30,000 women mentioned in the official histories of the Ming dynasty and, of those, over 10,000 are mentioned in praise for their moral integrity. Yet, in these official historical records, it is difficult to find note of any intellectual women.

Constrained by patriarchal clan systems and traditional ethics, the social status of women in imperial China has always been considered to be relatively low. Especially during the Ming and Qing dynasties, women's status was oppressed in both ethical awareness and actual life. Some scholars have pointed out that the status of women within the family and society reached its lowest point in history during the

Ming and Qing period.¹ It was at this time that the freedom of marriage for Chinese women almost disappeared. However, at the same time, a very contrary situation appeared with regards to Chinese women; at the time when their status was considered to be at its lowest point, the number of female poets and published literary works by women reached its peak.

There were over 3,700 female poets living and writing during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The rich tradition of writing by women in China was first explored by scholar Hu Wenkai.² In his work, *Women's Writings Through the Ages*, he recorded over 4,000 female poets' poems ranging from the Han dynasty (202BCE – 220 AD) to modern times. The work of female poets living during the last two imperial dynasties (the Ming 1368-1644 and Qing 1644-1912) constituted the majority of Hu's book. In her chapter in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, Kang-i Sun highlights the fact that female poets living during the Ming and Qing dynasties produced the largest catalogue of poetic anthologies and collections in the world.³

¹ Duan Tali 段塔丽, *Tang dai funv diwei yanjiu* 唐代妇女地位研究 [The research of women's status in the Tang dynasty] (Beijing: Beijing ren min chu ban she, 2000), 293.

² Hu Wenkai 胡文楷, *Lidai funv zhuzuo kao* 历代妇女著作考 [Women's writing through the ages] (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she, 1985).

³ Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, "Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women's Poetry and Their Selection Strategies," in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 147.

The reason for this contradictory situation between the low status of women in society and the proliferation of women's writing was that, during this period, especially in the region of the Yangtze River Delta, elite families treated female education as a common act. Female education and domestic family life along with the combined effect of social, cultural, economic trends, and the commercialized publishing industry led to a growth of women writers.⁴ Taking the above reasons into consideration, most of these female poets were educated, gentry women (*guixiu*, 闺秀) from influential and official families.⁵ The gentry women were part of the ruling class and from elite families; their fathers, brothers, and husbands were usually higher degree holders, well-known poets, and scholar-officials.⁶ The gentry men held the belief that women who were educated could better contribute to caring for the family and could also raise their reputation as influential families. Not having to worry about material conditions for survival also meant that gentry women had the time available to receive an education.

⁴ Grace S. Fong and Ellen Widmer, "The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing," in *The Inner Quarters and beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 1-15.

⁵ There were some highly educated women working as courtesans who did not come from the gentry class. These educated courtesans did not attend the formation of poetry clubs so they will not be discussed in this thesis.

⁶ Daria Berg and Chloë Starr, "Negotiating Gentility: The Banana Garden Poetry Club in Seventeenth-Century China," in *The Quest for Gentility in China: Negotiations beyond Gender and Class* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 73-74.

On the one hand, these women dealt with significant pressures from their families and society to behave in keeping with their status as gentry. They were expected to care for their parents-in-law and their husbands and also undertake the education of their children. On the other hand, their access to education allowed these gentry women to begin exploring an increased sense of self. Like the gentry men of the period, they actively engaged in various social activities such as the formation of poetry clubs.

The formation of literary and poetry clubs intensified from the late Ming period onwards. This was influenced by various changing social, cultural, and political factors between the late Ming and early Qing periods, which will be analyzed in the next chapters. The spread of poetry clubs by gentry men had an impact on many female poets at that time. The earliest female poetry clubs started to appear in influential and official families during the late Ming period. In other words, most of the female poetry clubs were kinship-based, illustrating the superior importance of family in Chinese culture. Famous female kinship-based poetry clubs from the early period that will be analyzed in this thesis are the Shang Jinglan (商景兰) family; Shen

Yixiu (沈宜修) family; the Banana Garden Poetry Club (蕉园诗社) and the Mingyuan Poetry Club (名媛诗社).

➤ **Research Question**

This thesis will focus on examining the role of the family in the formation of female poetry clubs between the late Ming dynasty and the early Qing dynasty (1550-1700). Family features under consideration may include the relationships between members, the economic conditions, the geographical location, and the cultural background of these kinship-based poetry clubs. The research will address how the 名媛 poetry club (*ming yuan*, “famous gentry women”; 名 means famous, and 媛 means gentry women) was engaged in poetic activities under the influence of family. Their activities include writing poems, sharing poems, and having works published in publications in Tongcheng city (桐城) Anhui province (安徽).

➤ **Methodology and Literature Review**

The thesis will use both a socio-historical method of approach and textual analysis to analyze data and texts. The socio-historical method examines the literature in its economic, cultural, and political context and seeks to explore the exact meaning and impact of these factors on the literary development over time. In addition, this

focus on socio-historical factors will be used to explore the development of the poetry clubs of both male and female poets, the status of female poets in imperial China, the social background, the economic condition, the geographic location and the cultural background of the gentry families whose female members took part in these female poetry clubs. Primary and secondary sources will be examined in these sections.

First, I will look at the development of poetry clubs in general and the emergence of female poets in particular that laid the foundation for female poetry clubs in the late Ming dynasty. Some modern scholars have collected extracts from the historical record of previous Chinese imperial dynasties and edited them into encyclopedia articles and books to illustrate how these poetry clubs first emerged. For example, Liu's "Record of Ancient Poetry Clubs" (1989) and Chen's "The Origin of Chinese Poetry Clubs" (2013) use official historical records from the Han dynasty to the Qing dynasty to examine the origins of poetry clubs during this period. In *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (2004), Wilt Idema and Beata Grant delve into the rich tradition of women's writing of the imperial period (221 BCE – 1911 AD), presenting the biographical and representative works of a selection of female poets.

Secondly, to explore the influence of family on female poetry clubs, the social and cultural background cannot be ignored. I will analyze primary sources, including official historical records edited by the government such as the *History of the Ming* (1739) and *The Draft History of the Qing* (1928), to illustrate the influence of family. The economic condition and geographic location of the gentry families that formed female poetry clubs are also relevant to my research; the Fang sisters and their Mingyuan Poetry Club are a representative example of this. Official local records such as *Tongcheng County Gazetteer Kangxi edition* (1995) (*Kangxi Tongcheng Xianzhi* 康熙桐城县志), and records written by local scholars such as Ma Qichang's *The Biographies of Individuals in Tongcheng City*, (*Tongcheng qijiu zhuan*, 桐城耆旧传) are excellent sources of research. For these and other standard classical materials, I mostly refer to Endymion Wilkinson's work, *Chinese History: A New Manual*, for the English translation of book titles.

Thirdly, textual analysis is used to analyze the poetic works produced by members of these female poetry clubs. My review of these texts will employ “a

social, historical, political, theoretical, and ideological awareness.”⁷ One objective of textual analysis is to determine how and why specific texts are valued for a range of social, cultural, economic, and political reasons. Using this method in my thesis, I will use poetic works representative of several female poetry clubs to illustrate the personal relationships, writing styles, and thematic choices influenced by the family, especially works from the Fang sisters’ poetry club.

Due to the insufficient preservation of certain sources, many of the works published by the female poetry clubs in the Ming and Qing dynasty cannot be found in contemporary literary sources. The poetic works left by the female poets, for now, are mainly acquired from other poetry collections edited by other female poets who lived during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Most of the poetic works of the Mingyuan Poetry Club originate from two sources, *The Grace of Longmian* (*Longmian Fengya*, 龙眠风雅) and *A Study of Anhui Women’s Literature Works in the Ming and Qing Dynasties* (*Ming-Qing Anhui Funü Wenxue Zhushu Jikao*, 明清安徽妇女文学著述

⁷ David Birch, “Introduction” in *Language, Literature and Critical Practice: Ways of Analysing Text* (London, UK: Routledge, 2016), 1-2.

辑考).⁸ *The Grace of Longmian* was compiled by Pan Jiang (潘江, c. 1701) who came from the city of Tongcheng. The title *Longmian* was the name of a mountain in Tongcheng. This work included a total of ninety-two volumes, five hundred and fifty-three authors, 14,874 poems and nearly three million words. The book was an anthology of poetry focused on poetry created in Tongcheng from the Wanli period (1573-1620) of the Ming dynasty to the beginning of the Qing dynasty.

This poetry collection was later included in the *Collection of Banned and Destroyed Books from the Complete Library of the Four Branches* (四库禁毁书丛刊). The *Collection of Banned and Destroyed Books from the Complete Library of the Four Branches* edited over three thousand deleted books from the *Complete Library of the Four Branches* (the imperial encyclopedia by the Qing government) for ideological, political, ethnic, and regional reasons.⁹ It is no longer known why exactly *The Grace of Longmian* was banned by the Qing government, but it may have been because the collection contained some poetic works by Ming loyalists. The editor Pan Jiang himself is one of the Ming loyalists. *The Grace of Longmian*

⁸ Fu Ying 傅瑛, *Ming Qing Anhui funü wenxue zhu shu ji kao* 明清安徽妇女文学著述辑考 [A Study of Anhui Women's Literature Works in the Ming and Qing Dynasties](Anhui: Huangshan shu she, 2010), 127-198.

⁹ Tong Qingsong 童庆松, "Si ku quan shu yuanliu yaolue" 《四库全书》源流要略 [The Research of Imperial Collection of Four], *Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 古籍整理研究学刊, 2 (1999): 42-49.

collected poems from five members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club, including forty-two poems by Fang Mengshi (方孟式), eighty poems by Fang Weiyi (方维仪), five poems by Fang Weize (方维则), fourteen poems by Wu Lingyi (吴令仪), and five poems by Wu Lingze (吴令则). Pan's choice to include these works by the Mingyuan Poetry Club, with the selections possibly depending on the editor's evaluation and preference for the literary value of the poetic works of these particular five members.

In order to collect as many works as possible, I also use Dr. Fu Ying's *A Study of Anhui Women's Literature Works in the Ming and Qing Dynasties* as a significant source for this thesis. Fu's study contains a total of 617 works by female authors from Anhui. This collection includes various material on female poets and their families from different works of the time, as well as their representative poems, which gives many details about the Fang sisters' background.¹⁰

The reason for using the poetic works as a source of analysis on the important role of family in female poetry club members is because poetry offers rich potential for exploring the lesser-known aspects of women's self-constructed life

¹⁰ Dr. Fu's work integrates poetic works of Anhui female poets from a variety of primary sources, and adds punctuation to these poems. It helps to make my translation work more smoothly. However, she only provides brief excerpts from related materials for the female poets' background information.

histories.¹¹ However, there are still problems and limitations to using literary collections as sources for historical understanding, especially with regards to exploring the lived reality of gentry women's personal lives.

The official and local history records used in this thesis provide the social or cultural background for a deeper exploration of the personal experience of these gentry women poets. Most of the information available to us comes through highly conventional texts representing particular social and cultural norms. There is much we still do not know about the realities of gentry women's lives – our sources are silent on a lot of detail.

As mentioned earlier, most gentry women named in the official histories of this period were included as moral models of chastity and female virtue. Therefore, their poetic works inevitably express the conventional messages of chastity and virtue praised by society at the time; these are the kind of poetic themes that would bring glory to their upper-class families. Despite the limitations of these conventions, the poems written by the gentry women poets were able to articulate the emotional and

¹¹ Grace S. Fong, "Auto/biographical Subjects: Ming-Qing Women's Poetry Collections as Sources for Women's Life Histories," in *Overt and Covert Treasures*, Chen, Jo-shui, et al. (Hongkong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2012), 371.

ethical character of women during this period. The poetic works were a significant medium for self-representation for these educated women in this late imperial period of China.¹²

One major challenge encountered in this thesis was to produce the English translation for works of poetry written by the members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club. Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy translated ten of them to English in the book *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*.¹³

However, these English translations were only of Fang Weiyi's poetic work. For the purpose of this thesis, I have translated additional works by Fang Weiye and works by other members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club. I used Stephen Owen's translation on *The Poetry of Du Fu* as reference for the titles of the poems¹⁴ and translated the poems using plain and direct meaning without maintaining the poems' rhyme scheme.

As my thesis reveals the family factors influencing the content of these poems and illustrates the communication among the members of the poetry clubs, these original

¹² Fong, "Auto/biographical Subjects: Ming-Qing Women's Poetry Collections as Sources for Women's Life Histories," 370.

¹³ Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Du Fu and Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016).

translations of poetic works by the Fang sisters and analysis of the hitherto understudied works of the Mingyuan Poetry Club may serve as pioneering works and useful resources for further research in the field.

Finally, understanding the involvement of male members of the family in setting up poetry clubs and how they viewed female members' writing is also essential to my research. The male family members took pride in their female members' literary talents and there is significant mention of their presence in their writing. For example, in the *Literary Works in Fu Mountain* (2017) (*Fushan Wenji* 浮山文集) written by Fang Weiye's nephew and the most famous male scholar in the Fang family, Fang Yizhi (方以智, 1611-1671), a considerable number of works describing and evaluating the literary life of the Fang sisters from the Mingyuan Poetry Club are included.¹⁵ I will use these writings to explore how male members of the family evaluated their female family members who attended the female poetry clubs.

➤ **Significance of the Study**

As mentioned before, Hu Wenkai was the scholar who first became aware of the rich tradition of writing by women in China. The first edition of Hu's book was

¹⁵ These will be discussed in Chapter 4, see pp.80-81.

published in 1957. The western scholar Charlotte Furth was the first to note the impact of Hu's scholarship on the research of late imperial upper-class female poets. In her study of female poets in the Ming and Qing dynasties, she found the poetry collections by female poets in these dynasties represented the "recovery of a very substantial body of literary production."¹⁶ Rather than research the individual works, these early scholars were more concerned with starting a process of recovery and rediscovery of women writers in late imperial China.

After the rediscovery of female poets in late imperial China, the poetry written by women in the Ming and Qing started to be recognized by the mainstream literary sphere as a minor literature.¹⁷ Robertson defines minor literature as literature that discusses the desires and positions of marginalized people in society. The formal recognition of these literary creations as a minor literature shows the legacy of Chinese gentry women's achievements during this time. They were officially regarded as writers in publishing literary works. For women considered to be of lower status in imperial Chinese society, they had established their own voice through

¹⁶ Charlotte Furth, "Poetry and Women's Culture in Late Imperial China: Editor's Introduction," *Late Imperial China*. 13 (1992): 1.

¹⁷ Fong, Widmer, and Robertson. "Literary Authorship by Late Imperial Governing-Class Chinese Women and the Emergence of a Minor Literature", 375.

literary creation. During this period, the male literati also provided education for their female family members and helped them publish their poetry collections. This kind of behavior suggests the acknowledgement of the status of women's writing as a minor literature in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Even though numerous scholars and researchers have focused on rediscovering the large number of works by female poets that lived in the last two imperial Chinese dynasties, fewer studies have focused on the relationship between family influences and their poetic works. This thesis will especially focus on the gentry women poets and the poetry clubs formed by them during the late Ming and early Qing period.

For these gentry women poets, the family is their central arena. The family during this period became a repository of learning and heightened the lineage formation for elites. Family life for the elites was not only a domestic space, but also a social, political, and cultural institution.¹⁸ All of these functions of family deeply influenced gentry women's everyday life and their characteristics.

¹⁸ Dorothy Ko, "Talent, Virtue, and Beauty: Rewriting Womanhood," in *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 148.

Existing research on gentry women writing focuses on poetic themes and literary values. The family background of the female poets and the family influences on the formation of female poetry clubs are not discussed, nor is the literary study of their works. For instance, for the Mingyuan Poetry Club, studies such as those by Song, Chang, and Saussy give only a brief introduction to Fang Weiyi and her sisters and focus mainly on analyzing the poetic works of Fang Weiyi. Works by other members of her poetry club, as well as her family members, have not been studied to any great extent. This may be due to the fact that few of their poems remain in existence or because other scholars have not affirmed the literary value of their writing. However, according to many scholars such as Liang Shiqiu and Qian Liqun, the Fang family is considered to be the second most influential family in Chinese culture and it would follow that the works of the Fang sisters have value.¹⁹ The members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club that were a part of this influential family and lived in this typical elite cultural environment can help us understand the family

¹⁹ The most influential family in Chinese culture are considered as Confucius' family.

dynamics of upper-class women and their life histories, particularly the significant role that family played in their lives.

The meaning of “typical” here only refers to the initial development of the upper-class female kinship-based poetry clubs established by the Shen Yixiu family and the Shang Jinglan family, the early stage of the Banana Garden Poetry Club, and the Mingyuan Poetry Club. These kinship-based female poetry clubs were not standard, formalized poetry clubs. Being from families that were high-ranking and famous, these women were educated and their literary groups were well known by the literati and wider society. The conditions that led to the development of these kinship-based female poetry clubs analyzed in this thesis were determined by their influential family backgrounds.

Although there are limitations to comprehending the life experience of these women from an exploration of existing materials and their poetic works, the family life and psychological activities shown through their writing has research significance. The connections and relations between Fang Weiyi and her sisters in their poetry club has yet to receive significant scholarly attention. By using the Fang

sisters' Mingyuan Poetry Club as a focus of research, this thesis will analyze how and to what extent the family influenced the formation of women's poetry clubs and also how the family dynamic affected the poetic works written by the members of these clubs in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

In the existing research, female poetry clubs are rarely addressed. Dorothy Ko mentions the kinship-based poetry clubs established by gentry women in her research on famous female poets. She indicates that gentry women poets often built informal poetry clubs which provided a place for women in the family to meet for entertainment or serious academic discussions.²⁰ The poetry clubs that gentry women poets established within their families expanded women's social space to a certain extent because they were able to engage in academic activities with their female relatives. Yet, compared with gentry male poets, gentry women's social space was inevitably limited. Whereas, male poets might form their poetry club based on region, friendship, examination cohorts, political or poetical affinities, these elite women had fewer opportunities to create social networks beyond their kinship ties. To this extent,

²⁰ Ko, "Domestic Communities: Male and Female Domains," 180.

it is reasonable that the kinship-based female poetry club became the most common type of association for gentry women poets.

I argue in this thesis that kinship-based female poetry clubs are a rich resource for researching the family life of gentry women who lived during the Ming and Qing period. Although these gentry women could not build their poetry clubs without the support of their male relatives, the phenomenon of these kinship-based female poetry clubs were independent of the male world to some extent. We can learn much about the family lives of these female poets by exploring the poetically-framed expressions of such themes as grief, longing, sisterhood, war, marriage, widowhood, travel, and family background in their writing. Although their poems cannot completely reproduce their lived experience, we are able to gain insight into their lives through the treatment of themes expressed in the works of these upper-class female poets.

The existing studies of female poetry clubs, such as Ko's work, more frequently touch on the phenomenon of women establishing poetry clubs through

analyzing particular poets' lives.²¹ Thus far, there has been little scholarship that focuses on systematically analyzing the formation of kinship-based female poetry clubs. My thesis moves beyond individual biographies to provide a more detailed understanding of these gentry women's lives during the late Ming and early Qing period by examining the role of the family in the formation of female poetry clubs.

²¹ Ko mentions the domestic poetry clubs in her analysis of Shen Yixiu and her female relatives. Ko, "Domestic Communities," 179-218.

Chapter 2: The Background of Chinese Poetry Club

Formation

Poetry clubs— established societies where poets regularly meet together— have played an essential role in the history of classical Chinese poetry since the Tang dynasty (618-907). The history of poetry clubs in imperial China dates the earliest poetry club to the end of the Tang dynasty (618-907). A note in the *Record of Mount Jiuhua* (*Jiuhuashan lu* 九华山录) published in the late Tang dynasty indicates there was a poetry club formed in Mount Jiuhua and that many poets wanted to join in its activities. Poetry clubs underwent considerable development in quality and quantity during the Song period (960-1279). In Vol.10 of *Collected Poetry of Su Shi* (*Su Shi shiji* 苏轼诗集), there is a poem titled “Writing a History Poem to Blame You for not Attending the Poetry Club’s Meeting” (*Shugu yishi jianze lü bu fuhui* 述古以诗见责屡不赴会) written by Su Shi (1037-1101). This poem shows that poetry clubs in the Song dynasty already held assigned meetings for its members.

Forming a poetry club became a widespread practice, especially for late Ming and early Qing poets who lived between 1550 and 1700. In this period, it was

common practice for famous literati, poets, and other educated people to join poetry clubs.²² From 1550 to 1700, Chinese classic poetry clubs became more formalized and organized than in the previous period. According to Li Shiren's research, there were more than 800 poetry clubs established in the Ming dynasty, which is ten times the number of clubs established during that of the Song dynasty.²³ It was mostly well-educated individuals that organized the poetry clubs and set the regulations for members during this period. For example, the Yilao Poetry Club (遗老诗社) in the Hangzhou (杭州) area set a regulation stipulating that members must write poetry that follows their hearts. Proper themes for poetry included beautiful landscapes, rural lives, daily life, and emotions; political and vulgar topics were seen as inappropriate themes. Generally, poetry clubs would publish the works of their members in poetry collections and the profits from these collections would be used to support the clubs.²⁴

The formation of such a large number of poetry clubs was the result of various social, political, and cultural factors. A large number of poetry clubs began to emerge

²² Liu Xuezhong 刘学忠, "Gudai shishe chu kao" 古代诗社初考 [Research of Poetry Clubs in Imperial China], *Fuyang shiyuan xuebao* 阜阳师院学报 005 (1989): 35-38.

²³ Li Shiren 李时人, "Ming dai wenren jieshe zhou yi" 明代文人结社诂议 [The Literati Association in the Ming Dynasty], *Shanghai shifan daxue xuebao* 上海师范大学学报 44, no.1 (January 2015): 77.

²⁴ Yang Yinquan, Tian Shu and Nie Dajiang 杨银权, 田澍, 聂大江 [Association and Community], in *Ming Qing shiqi de zhishi jieceng* 明清时期的知识阶层 [The intellectual class in the Ming and Qing periods] (Lanzhou, China: Lanzhou da xue chu ban she, 2017), 190.

in the late Ming period, mainly during the reign of the twelfth (1522-1566), thirteenth (1567-1572), and fourteenth emperors (1573-1620) of the Ming. Since the thirteenth emperor, the Longqing Emperor (隆庆帝), was in power for only a short time, his reign will not be discussed in detail.

➤ Political Background

The twelfth emperor of the Ming dynasty, the Jiajing Emperor (嘉靖帝), was obsessed with Daoism and, for a considerable period of time, he refused to attend to his duties at court. He used the treacherous court official Yan Song (严嵩) to rule the government from 1548 to 1561. During this period, any officials whose opinions differed from those of Yan Song (1480-1567) would not be heard by the emperor and dissenters risked losing their official posts.²⁵ Moreover, some officials were killed during this period because they impeached Yan Song.²⁶ Many scholar-officials were unable to follow the usual path of government service because of the political climate and its associated tensions. Therefore, many well-educated men who were dismissed

²⁵ Sun Xuetao 孙学堂, "Lun Yansong dang guo shiqi qi zi de jingshen zhuangtai" 论严嵩当国时期后七子的精神状态 [The psychological wellbeing of the latter seven scholars when Yan Song was in power], *Nankai daxue xuebao* 南开大学学报 5 (2016): 72-80.

²⁶ The Ming drama "Record of Mingfeng" (mingfeng ji 鸣凤记) written by Wang Shizhen (1526-1590) was created after Yan Song was ejected from the court and recorded how the official Yang Jisheng was impeached and killed.

from the government or left the court by themselves returned to their home region and formed poetry clubs to express their opinions.

In the early period of the fourteenth emperor, the Wanli Emperor (万历帝, r.1573-1620) appointed Prime Minister Zhang Juzheng (张居正, 1525-1582) to implement a series of political and economic reforms. The reforms presided over by Zhang Juzheng helped the Ming dynasty economy develop rapidly. For example, it is mentioned in the *History of the Ming* that the grain stored in the state treasury could provide food to all populations of the Ming dynasty for ten years when Zhang was in power.²⁷ These reforms raised the standard of living significantly so that people could afford more access to education and spend more on entertainment. However, the Wanli Emperor did not follow the rules to govern the country in the later period of his reign, which weakened the imperial power to some extent.

The Wanli Emperor's withdrawal from court duties led to the rise of the emergence of new ideas. Various political forces in the court played their roles under

²⁷ “Zhang Juzheng Zhuang 张居正传 [Biography of Zhang Juzheng], in *History of Ming 明史*. No. 110. As quoted in Sturgeon, *Chinese Text Project* (2011). Locations of the textual references given in this paper can also be determined using the Chinese Text Project website: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=410835&remap=gb>. “居正为政.....太仓粟充盈，可支十年”

this background. During this period, officials could resign freely. The political and ideological freedom of society had significantly increased.²⁸ This kind of freedom stimulated the desire of the literati to create literary works and communicate with each other. It was under these conditions that the literary and poetry clubs among the literati came into being.

Another active period of literary and poetry clubs was the period when the Qing dynasty replaced the Ming dynasty. The Ming dynasty came to an end in 1644 and the Qing succeeded and began to rule imperial China. For intellectuals of this period, poetry clubs became the central place to express their thoughts and feelings. In particular, such clubs and associations allowed a space for Ming loyalists to express their complex feelings about the loss of the dynasty through their poetry. A large number of intellectuals who remained loyal to the Ming dynasty were unwilling to serve the Qing government. Therefore, they expressed their nostalgia for the previous government and emperor by forming poetry clubs with their colleagues.

²⁸ Liao Kebin 廖可斌, “Wanli wei wenxue shengshi shuo” 万历为文学盛世说 [A discussion of the Wanli period as literature’s Golden Age], in *Lixue yu wenxue lunji* 理学与文学论集 [The discussion between Neo-Confucianism and literature] (Beijing: Dong fang chu ban she, 2015), 173.

According to statistics, there were at least seventy literati clubs active in the early Qing period. Of these, more than fifty clubs were formed by Ming loyalists.²⁹

For example, the nephew of the Fang sisters in the Mingyuan Poetry Club was a member of the famous Ming loyalist association, the Restoration Society (*Fu She*, 复社). Analysis of the works of the gentry women poetry clubs reveals that many of their poems contained political themes and themes of war under the influence of their family and male family members as well.

➤ **Social Background**

Due to Zhang Juzheng's reform, the development of the economy proliferated. According to statistics, the population during the late Ming and early Qing doubled between the period of 1500 and 1650.³⁰ Because passing the civil examination was considered the path to wealth and status, education was widely valued by the Chinese people. Based on the doubling of the population, it can be assumed that the number of educated people increased along with the growth of the economy during this time.

²⁹ He Zongmei 何宗美, *Ming mo Qing chu wenren jieshe yanjiu* 明末清初文人结社研究 [The research on scholars' association during the late Ming and early Qing dynasty] (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chuban she, 2003), 308.

³⁰ Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow, "On the History of the Book in China," in *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, eds. Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 11-12.

The rise in number of educated people would inevitably lead to the demand for an increase in printed materials, particularly the classics. The publishing industry developed rapidly at this time. During the Ming dynasty, overprinting technology developed, meaning that books with two colors or even four colors could be printed.³¹ With the development of new technology in the publishing industry, a large number of bookshops specializing in compiling literary books began to appear. According to the “Record of Fiction Bookstores,”³² there were only three bookstores in the Song and Yuan dynasties and six before the Wanli period. By contrast, at least forty-five bookstores appeared during the Wanli period.

Many literati with higher literary skills began to enter the commercial publishing industry. Editing, engraving and selling books became possible career choices for some of the literati. For example, the famous scholar Feng Menglong (冯梦龙, 1574-1646) was devoted to collecting folk songs, novels, and dramas, and he worked on organizing, processing and publishing from the end of the Wanli period

³¹ Yang Yanyan 杨艳燕, “Ming dai taoyin shanben kaolue sanzong” 明代套印善本考略三种 [Research of three kinds of overprint books in the Ming Dynasty], *Jin zhong xueyuan xuebao* 晋中学院学报 30 No.4 (August, 2013): 113.

³² Wang Qingyuan & Han Xiduo 王清原 韩锡铎, *Xiao shuo shu fang Lu* 小说书坊录 [A record of fiction bookstores] (Beijing: Beijing tu shu chu ban she, 2002), 1-17.

onwards.³³ A large number of bookshops appeared and Nanjing became one of the largest publishing centers in the country during the Wanli period.³⁴ The proliferation of publishers and bookshops encouraged the growth of poetry clubs publishing poetry collections in the Yangtze River region.

Education was more accessible as the demand for literary communication also increased. Hence, surplus income for entertainment also increased due to the growth in the economy. Ordinary citizens were becoming consumers of literature. During this period, passing the Imperial Examination and becoming an official in the government was not the only means of survival for the literati, as many scholars could now make a living from producing the literature itself.

Literary gatherings such as the formation of poetry clubs became a medium for literary communication. This development was welcomed and encouraged by the growing number of people engaged in commercial literary activities. Some poetry clubs selected the poetic works of members to compile into books in cooperation with

³³ Feng Menglong (1574-1646) was seen as the most knowledgeable connoisseur of literature in the Ming dynasty. His famous published works included *Stories Old and New* (Gujin xiaoshuo, published around 1620), *Stories to Caution the World* (Jingshi tongyan, published in 1624), *Stories to Awaken the World* (Xingshi hengyan, published in 1627). The English title's translation come from: Menglong Feng, Shuhui Yang, and Yunqin Yang, *Sanyan Stories Favorites from a Ming Dynasty Collection* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

³⁴Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow, "On the History of the Book in China," in *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, eds. Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 111.

bookshops in order to make a shared profit.³⁵ These factors such as the development of the commodity economy and the improvement of the printing industry provided suitable conditions for an increase in cultural activities and the growth and spread of poetry clubs.

➤ Cultural Background

The emergence and formation of numerous poetry clubs during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties was initially influenced by the Jiajing and Wanli emperors of the Ming dynasty. Literary activities were extremely active under the Wanli Emperor's reign, to the point that the reign of the Wanli Emperor is referred to as one of the golden ages in the history of classical Chinese literature.³⁶ The Wanli period was supposed to be one of the freest and most active periods in the history of Chinese ideology. At this time, the influence of the School of Mind (*Xinxue*, 心学) continued to expand and Neo-Confucianism gradually developed as well. Famous scholars giving public lectures were popular in society and educated people communicated with each other in an intense academic atmosphere.

³⁵ Yang, Tian, and Nie, "Association and Community," 193.

³⁶ Liao, "Wanli wei wenxue shengshi shuo," 171.

In the late Ming period, many male scholars in poetry clubs promoted the School of Mind, contributing to a rise in individualistic thinking. The School of Mind was a highly influential Ming philosophical movement associated with the mid-Ming dynasty thinker Wang Yangming (王阳明, 1472-1529) and his followers. This school of thought broke away from the more orthodox teachings of Cheng-Zhu's Neo-Confucianism (程朱理学)³⁷ and instead emphasized individualism and cultivation of the self. One of the more controversial figures associated with the School of Mind, Li Zhi (李贽, 1527-1602), briefly discussed issues of gender equality. He considered that one's ability to learn was determined by the environment in which one lived rather than being determined by innate gender differences.³⁸ The School of Mind changed the standard by which male scholars evaluated female scholars to some extent.

The famous scholar, Ye Shaoyuan (叶绍袁, 1589-1648), who lived in the late Ming dynasty, advocated the idea that women should pursue virtue, literary talent, and beauty throughout their whole life. Ye Shaoyuan's views were part of a new trend in which male scholars encouraged women of the elite class to receive a literary

³⁷ Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism was declared an official ideology in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368).

³⁸ This part will be analyzed in detail in chapter four of this thesis discussing the Fang family learning.

education in addition to being educated in the standard moral and physical virtues of the era.³⁹ Male scholars began to encourage women to receive an education and write poetry. Numerous male scholars wrote prefaces to women's poetry collections and helped female poets to publish their works. Therefore, not only the male scholars and poets but also female poets were able to get together to form poetry clubs during the Ming and Qing periods.

Under the political, social and cultural conditions experienced between the late Ming and early Qing period, both the number and the degree of development of Chinese poetry clubs reached its peak. First, due to the nonfeasance of the late Ming emperors and the political struggles that ensued, a large number of well-educated people resigned from the court and formed poetry clubs in their hometowns. The weakened imperial power meant reduced restrictions on new ideas being formed by intellectuals at this time and literary and poetry clubs became the carriers of their new ideologies. After the Qing government replaced the Ming's ruling position in imperial China, many Ming loyalists refused to work for the Qing government. Forming poetry

³⁹ Ye, Shaoyuan 叶绍袁, "Preface" *Wu Meng Tang Ji* 午梦堂集 [The collection of Wumeng Studio] (Beijing: Zhong hua shu ju, 1998), 1.

clubs with other Ming loyalists became a way to comfort their spiritual world and allowed them to communicate with like-minded intellectuals.

Secondly, the economy developed rapidly under Zhang Juzheng's reforms. More families in the late Ming period could afford an education for their family members, including female family members. The publishing industry developed due to the growth of a well-educated population. The improvement of printing technology and the commercial development of the industry also facilitated the publication of poetry collections by poetry club members. These people could earn an income by writing and editing books. Some poetry clubs began to cooperate with bookshops, thus becoming part of the publishing industry chain. Poetry clubs were no longer just a platform for exchanging literary ideas, but also an economic platform for well-educated people.

Finally, under the combined action of political and social factors, a multitude of new ideas emerged at this time. Male scholars influenced by Wang Yangming's School of Mind began to change their views on women, especially as literary talent became one of the standards by which society measured female virtue. Many males

from gentry families supported and encouraged female family members to receive an education and publish literary works.

Gentry women, inspired by their education, began to join the wave by forming poetry clubs just like their male counterparts. The formation of poetry clubs by women during this period was also influenced by political, social and cultural contexts. For gentry women, their main social space during this period was within the family and roles within the family were determined by the social division of labor.

Although men enjoyed authority over women and children, women were the actual managers of the household. During the late Ming and early Qing period, as more and more gentry women were educated, they also took on the role of educators to their children. It was the juxtaposition of a female's domestic sphere with a male's political sphere to some extent.⁴⁰

Familial relationships are complex in China. The family unit was an important political, social and cultural arena in imperial China which will be analyzed in next

⁴⁰ Ko, "Introduction," 12.

chapter. The importance of family affected all aspects of gentry women's lives and it also led to the establishment of kinship-based female poetry club.

Chapter 3: The Importance of Family and Kinship-based Female Poetry Clubs

As the most basic economic and social unit, the family was a unique cultural entity for most people in imperial China. Since the Song dynasty, Chinese families shared a set of standard features including patrilineal inheritance, patriarchal social structure and virilocal residence.⁴¹ Patrilineal inheritance meant that daughters had no rights to inheritance and the social standing and property of a family would only be passed from father to son. The patriarchal social structure meant that the father, as head of the family, possessed absolute power; a woman's life before marriage and her marriage choices were determined by her father. Following a virilocal pattern, once married, women would separate from their original family to become a member of their husband's family. There were exceptions to these standard features throughout Chinese history such as cases where upper-class families with daughters were permitted to transfer family property through the uxorilocal marriage.⁴² However,

⁴¹ Endymion Wilkinson, "Family & Kin," in *Chinese History: A New Manual* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 95-96.

⁴² Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, "Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society," in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 5-6.

within the family unit, members strictly followed and maintained hierarchical relationships based on age and gender.

In late imperial China, significant and influential families formed clans as well. A clan was defined as an organization that included lineages or descent groups, which shared the same agnatic links. It could adapt to the needs of local elites to promote their ideology.⁴³ Therefore, as a clan-based agricultural society, the family played an essential role in the entire social structure.

Gradually, many influential families became the leading carriers of academic culture.⁴⁴ In other words, most of the prominent clans and families developed unique traditions of learning. Family learning would let all family members share the same cultural preference, literary preference and family values. The family's cultural identity and family learning greatly impacted the thoughts and behaviors of each of its members, including female members of the family.

⁴³ Wilkinson, "Family & Kin," 95-96.

⁴⁴ Zhou Chengqiang 周成强, "Lun jiazu wenhua dui Ming Qing tongcheng wangzu shiren chuanguo de yingxiang" 论家族文化对明清桐城望族诗人创作的影响 [Influence of family culture on Tongcheng distinguished family poets in the Ming and Qing dynasties] *Fuyang shi fan xue yuan xue bao* 阜阳师范学院学报 No.2 (2015), 62.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the number of educated people increased in the late Ming period and the spread of the School of Mind philosophy changed men's view to some extent. Official or influential families were generally affluent so that they were able to undertake the educational expenses associated with educating their female family members. They were also willing to invest in gentry women's education. The gentry men generally had a higher literary status and they often hoped that women in the family could be educated enough to have the ability to communicate with them and take on the responsibility of giving their children a proper education. Based on the social environment at that time, talented gentry women could improve the cultural level of the family and build the families reputation. Therefore, influential families were more willing to give their female members the opportunity of education. For example, Fang Kongzhao (方孔炤), husband of the Mingyuan Poetry Club member Wu Lingyi, mentioned that his wife had been given an education by her father. As well as becoming a talented painter and

writer after she married into the Fang family, Lingyi was already familiar with the classics of Buddhism and Daoism from her upbringing.⁴⁵

Society's requirement for women's knowledge and appreciation for women's literary talents entered the awareness of individual gentry women. Like their male counterparts, they began to seek out and learn literary skills. It was at this time that the popularity of forming poetry clubs among male intellectuals also became popular among gentry women. However, the family was the main social sphere for gentry women and traveling or encountering others outside of the family home was strongly discouraged. It was inevitable that most of the early female poetry clubs were organized within the families themselves.

The emergence of a large number of female poetry clubs was a particular feature of women's literature in the Ming and Qing dynasties. In her work on Ming and Qing women's poetry, scholar Kang-I Sun Chang points out that "no other nation has produced more anthologies or collections of women's poetries than late imperial China."⁴⁶ These well-educated women were not satisfied with writing poems in their

⁴⁵ Guang Tiefu & Fang Kongzhao 光铁夫,方孔昭, "Dao wang shi" 悼亡诗 [Death Lament], in *Anhui mingyuan shici zheng lue* 安徽名媛诗词征略 [The research of gentry women's poetry in Anhui] (Anhui: Huangshan shushe, 1986), 29.

⁴⁶ Widmer and Chang, "Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women's Poetry and Their Selection Strategies," 147.

“inner quarter”⁴⁷ and female poetry clubs formed by gentry women began to follow the social trends of male scholars forming poetry clubs in the late Ming dynasty.

Dorothy Ko has analyzed female gentry who were often involved in the formation of informal poetry clubs in the seventeenth-century Jiangnan region, one of China’s wealthiest areas whose literary environment was considered superior to other regions.

The number of female poetry clubs that formed in this area reached its height in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Ko classifies the female poetry clubs into three types:

domestic poetry clubs, social poetry clubs and public poetry clubs. The domestic poetry clubs were “familial” in the sense that all the members were related by kinship.

Ko considered the kinship-based poetry clubs to be the most informal type because their academic activities only occurred during the gentry women’s day-to-day lives.

Women’s social poetry clubs were comprised of family members, neighbors and friends from afar. Although membership in social poetry clubs was broader and more diverse than those based on kinship, Ko still views this type of female poetry club as

⁴⁷ Grace S. Fong defines the term “inner quarter” (guige 闺阁) as the organizing notion that is the inner space of gendered writing practices for cloistered women of established families in Grace S. Fong and Ellen Widmer, “Introduction,” in *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 10.

informal. The public poetry club claimed the most extensive membership and included female relatives, neighbors, fellow students, and like-minded writers. The reason why it was referred to as a “public” poetry club is because their members were visible to the public through their publications. This type of poetry club did not necessarily have a certain name.

In Ko’s view, these three types of poetry clubs gradually developed over time. When a kinship-based female poetry club started to absorb members from outside the family, it would subsequently become a social female poetry club. Once the social female poetry club was recognized by the mainstream literary world, it might then become a public female poetry club.⁴⁸ The definition of the public female poetry club is that it should be more formal and the composition of its members should be more public-oriented than the other two types of clubs.

The female poet members from kinship-based poetry clubs like Shen Yixiu’s family, Shang Jinglan’s family, the early period of Banana Garden Poetry Club, and the Mingyuan Poetry Club that will be discussed in detail below all published their

⁴⁸ Ko, “Introduction,” 14-16.

poetry collections. They were also known by other male intellectuals.⁴⁹ In the early period of the Banana Garden Poetry Club, the club was based on kinship but the members gave a formal name to the organization and wrote an essay announcing its establishment as a female poetry club. Later, it became a public poetry club because more members from the public were accepted into the group. Among the three types of female poetry clubs described above, the kinship-based poetry club, as the earliest and most prevalent female academic community, deeply reflects the enormous influence the institution of family had on these gentry women.

The early female poetry clubs beginning in the late Ming dynasty were mainly formed through kinship. The number of kinship-based female poetry clubs reached its height during this period in comparison to the other regionally-based, master's disciple-based, and social-based female poetry clubs.⁵⁰ Although the social space of female poets had expanded to some extent, it was still limited to the domestic sphere. The gentry women poets could only carry out their poetic activities under the form of family gatherings. In other words, it was understandable that the kinship-based female

⁴⁹ These kinship-based poetry club members would invite famous male intellectuals to write prefaces for their poetry collections.

⁵⁰ Fu You 付优 “Ming Qing nvxing jieshe zongshu” 明清女性结社综论 [On female associations in the Ming and Qing dynasties] *Beijing huagong daxue xuebao* 北京化工大学学报 No.74 (2011): 60.

poetry club was the most acceptable social choice of formation for female poets from the late Ming period onwards.

The kinship-based female poetry club became the most common form in the late Ming period. The members of kinship-based female poetry clubs were all gentry women. Male family members were also active in helping the gentry women to edit and publish their poetic works. Male literary editors were unusually supportive of creative women in the 1660s.⁵¹ Some male family members would set up a private school in the house for the female members and hire a teacher for them to learn how to write poems. And, in some cases, gentry men taught their female family members themselves.

Prominent families preferred to maintain their influence in specific areas. Many influential families chose to make alliances through marriage. Due to strict social standards constraining female virtue, the male family members in power limited female members from communicating with the outside world.⁵² Marriage

⁵¹ Ellen Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China," in *Late Imperial China* 10 no. 2 (1989): 1-43, <https://doi.org/10.1353/late.1989.0003>.

⁵² Lü Fei 吕菲 "Qing dai Anhui caiyuan jiating hua xianxiang de wenhua fenxi" 清代安徽才媛家庭化现象的文化分析 [The cultural analysis on the phenomenon of the family of talented women in Anhui Province in the Qing Dynasty], *Anhui guangbo dianshi daxue xuebao* 安徽广播电视大学学报 No.3 (2017): 99.

relations helped form a network for talented women in literature so that they could attend poetic activities at family gatherings. Therefore, the relationship among the early kinship-based female poetry club members was not only limited to sisters, but also sisters-in-law. The Shen family, Qi family (Shang Jinglan and her female relatives), the Banana Garden Poetry Club, and the Mingyuan Poetry Club discussed in further detail in the following chapters were all representative of female poetry clubs during this period. However, some of these groups would be better described as a family network of women writers rather than a formal female poetry club.

➤ **Shen Yixiu and Her Female Family Members**

Shen Yixiu (1590-1635) and her three daughters were an unparalleled literary group during the late Ming period. Yixiu came from a distinguished family of scholars in Wujiang (吴江), located in the Jiangsu Province of contemporary China.⁵³ At the age of sixteen, Yixiu married Ye Shaoyuan (1589-1649), who was also born into a scholar family from the Wujiang region. She gave birth to three daughters and five sons. The Shen and Ye families, like other influential Chinese families,

⁵³ Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, "Shen Yixiu and Her Daughters, Ye Wanwan, Ye Xiaoman, and Ye Xiaoluan," in *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 266.

maintained their reputation and local status through the Imperial Examination. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, nine family members in the Shen family and eight members in the Ye family passed the Imperial Examination which was rare in all of the Wujiang region.⁵⁴ Therefore, education was regarded as an essential foundation for the continued advancement of these families in the local and national arena.

The gentry women in these families also had the opportunity of education and literary creation under the influence of the male family members. According to Hao Lixia's statistics, twenty-seven female writers from the Shen family emerged from the historical records since the generation of Yixiu to form a group of female writers based on kinship with Yixiu at the core. After the marriage of Yixiu and Ye Shaoyuan, the Shen and Ye family became closely linked. A total of four couples married between these two influential families, leading to the formation of a complex familial relationship. This kind of generation-to-generation marriage closely linked the profound cultural accomplishments and family learning between the Shen and Ye

⁵⁴ Hao Lixia 郝丽霞, "Wujiang Shen shi nv zuojia qun de jiazhu tezhì jí chéngyīn" 吴江沈氏女作家群的家族特质及成因 [The features of formative influence on Shen Clan women writers in Wujiang], *Shanxi da xue xue bao* (Philosophy & Social Science) 山西大学学报 26, No.6 (2003): 9-53.

families and had a significant impact on the literary creation of the female writers in these families.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the formation of a kinship-based female poetry club is inseparable from the support of the central male members of the family. Yixiu and her daughters' literary group received strong support from her husband, Ye Shaoyuan. Yixiu's husband indicated "the three highest enduring standards for men are maintaining virtue, striving to achievement, and expressing thoughts through literature. And women also have three standards, which are virtue, literary talent, and beauty."⁵⁵ Ye's cousin, Ye Shaoyong mentioned in his preface to *Collected Works from the Daydreamer's Studio* that Ye and Shen couples usually wrote poems responding to each other and their daughters also tried to create companion pieces with their parents.

Yixiu's poetry collection *Their Thoughts* (*Yiren Si*, 伊人思) completed in 1636, was an anthology of 46 poems by women poets. She was able to complete this collection largely due to her husband's interest in women's poetry. Her husband also

⁵⁵ Ye, "Preface," 1. "丈夫有三不朽，立德、立功、立言，而妇人亦有三焉，德也，才与色也"

played a vital role in editing and publishing the anthology.⁵⁶ Therefore, in the inner quarter of Ye family, the inkstone and brush pen were always with the female members.⁵⁷ Under this kind of family environment, Yixiu and her female relatives often communicated about poetry at home. Many high-quality poems were created through this form of communication. These female family members comforted each other emotionally and wrote and shared companion pieces on poetry with each other.

Their literary talent is seen most distinctly in the highly praised works of Yixiu and her three daughters, Ye Wanwan (叶纨纨, 1610-1632), Ye Xiaowan (叶小纨, 1613-1657), and Ye Xiaoluan (叶小鸾, 1616-1632). Yixiu and her three daughters were very active in their poetic communications. For example, Yixiu recorded that she composed two poems set to the tune titled “Water Dragon Chant” (Shuilong yin 水龙吟). She asked her children to write by using the rhyming model of her original poems.⁵⁸ There were two poems written by her daughter Ye Wanwan and Ye Xiaoluan, which were “Water Dragon Chant: Early Autumn Provokes Nostalgic Feelings; Composed by My Two Sisters and Myself, Following Our Mother’s

⁵⁶ Fong and Widmer, “Retrieving the Past: Women Editors and Women’s Poetry, 1636-1941,” 83.

⁵⁷ Ye, “Preface,” 2.

⁵⁸ Chang and Saussy, “Shen Yixiu and Her Daughters, Ye Wanwan, Ye Xiaoman, and Ye Xiaoluan,” 277.

Rhyme” (水龙吟：次母韵，早秋感旧，同两妹作) and “Water Dragon Chant: Autumn Thoughts, Rhymed After Mother’s Poem on Things Past, When Father Was in the Capital” (水龙吟：秋思，次母忆旧之作，时父在都门).⁵⁹

However, the female poets of the Shen and Ye family, as represented by Yixiu and her daughters, had already begun to engage in poetry club activities. There was no formal name given to this kinship-based literary group. In other words, the regular activities of the poetry club appeared among the Shen and Ye female relatives, but without formal formation it should be classified as an informal poetry club and an example of the domestic type of female networks.

➤ **Shang Jinglan and Her Female Family Members**

Shang Jinglan (1604-ca.1680) came from an official family in Kuaiji (会稽, the previous name of Shaoxing city in Zhejiang Province). Jinglan’s father was Minister of Personnel during the last Ming Emperor’s reign.⁶⁰ She was thus born in a high-status official family and received an excellent education during her childhood.

Jinglan later married Qi Biaoqia (祁彪佳, 1602-1645), who came from a famous

⁵⁹ The English name of the poems referenced from the *Women Writers of Traditional China* and the original Chinese title referenced from *Collected Works from the Daydreamer’s Studio*.

⁶⁰ Chang and Saussy, “Shang Jinglan,” 277.

bibliophilic family. After marriage, she was surrounded by the intense literary atmosphere of her husband's family. Jinglan and her husband had a close relationship and they exchanged poetic works and wrote companion pieces with each other at home.⁶¹ The family environment gave Jinglan the space to develop her interests in creating poetry and her husband was supportive of her interest. He believed that having a talented gentry woman poet in the family would bring them glory.⁶²

With the support of her husband, Jinglan undertook the duty of educating other female members and leading poetic activities. According to the records, she had two daughters-in-law and four daughters, all of whom were talented at writing poetry. Jinglan often gathered female family members together to write poems. She would stipulate the rhythm and title of the poems for them to write and she would ask her daughters and daughters-in-law to carry stationery with them so when they had time to rest, they could work on their writing her. Jinglan and her female family members became famous at the time for their poetic activities.⁶³

⁶¹ Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊, *Jingzhiju shihua 静志居诗话* [Notes on poetry in Jingzhi House] (Beijing: Ren min wen xue chu ban she, 1990).

⁶² Qi Biaoja 祁彪佳, "Lin ju chi du" 林居尺牍 [The letters in Lin Studio] in *Qi Biaoja wengao 祁彪佳文稿* [The literature collection of Qi Biaoja] (Beijing: Guo jia tu shu guan chu ban she, 1991).

⁶³ Deng Hanyi 邓汉仪, "Shi guan 诗观 The view of poetry" *Siku jinhui shu congkan 四库禁毁书丛刊* [Collection of Banned and Destroyed Books from the Complete Library of the Four Branches] (Beijing: Beijing chu ban she, 1997).

Overseen by Jinglan, the female poetry meetings of the Qi family became a normal part of their daily activities. Jinglan recorded their activities as well: “My eldest daughter-in-law Zhang Dehui (张德蕙), second daughter-in-law Zhu Derong (朱德蓉), my daughter Xiuyan (修嫣) and Xiangjun (湘君) are all good at literary creation. During our free time, we will choose the topic and rhythm to use to create the poem and then write poetry together. We discuss the content of our poems and talk about things from the ancient times to the present. Sometimes other talented female writers come to visit us and they are not willing to leave.”⁶⁴

Compared with Shen Yixiu and her female family members, the Qi family’s poetic activities were expanding although they did not yet have a particular name for their group. Jinglan not only organized the poetry club activities with her female family members but also invited other gentry women to join them. Although some other gentry women occasionally visited and participated in their activities, no-one other than family became regular members of the poetry club. Therefore, Jinglan and

⁶⁴ Shang Jinglan 商景兰, “Qin lou yi gao xu” 琴楼遗稿序 [Preface of Posthumous Collection from the Studio Qin], in *Qi Biaoqia ji* 祁彪佳集 [The collection of Qi Biaoqia]. <http://digital.wustl.edu/ama0411.0430.009>. “长妇张氏德蕙，次妇朱氏德蓉，女修嫣、湘君，又俱解读书。每于女红之余，或拈题分韵，推敲风雅，或尚溯古昔，衡论当世，遇才妇淑媛，辄流连不能去”

her female family members' poetry club does not fit the exact definition of a social poetry club. However, it is clear that the female literary group in Qi family was not strictly a kin-based club.

➤ **The Banana Garden Poetry Club**

The Banana Garden Poetry Club can be seen as a formal poetry club formed by gentry women rather than a kinship-based women's poetry group. The Banana Garden Poetry Club was believed to be founded in 1676 in Hangzhou city.⁶⁵ The club was organized and initiated by Gu Yurui (顾玉蕊). She wrote an essay *The Start of the Banana Garden Poetry Club*. The purpose of this essay was to formalize the gathering of the poetry club and solemnly announced the formal alliance of its gentry women members. However, this essay cannot be found now.⁶⁶ From the title it can be determined that there were formal regulations considered in creating this female poetry club. The development of this poetry club was divided into early and late stages. When this female poetry club emerged from the Gu family in its early stage, all of the members were relatives. However, with further development in female

⁶⁵ The poetry club member Feng Xian wrote in her work: “蕉园之订，昉自丙辰”，which means the foundation of the Banana Poetry Club started on the Bingchen Year of the Kangxi Emperor's reign in 1676 C.E.

⁶⁶ Wu Jing 吴晶, “Jiao yuan shi she kao lun” 蕉园诗社考论 [Studies on The Banana Poetry Club], *Zhejiang xue kan* 浙江学刊 5 (2010): 66.

poetry clubs, members started to invite their friends from outside the family to join in the Banana Garden Poetry Club. Therefore, in its later stage as a poetry club, it was no longer a kinship-based female poetry club. This thesis only discusses the early stage in the development of the Banana Garden Poetry Club because it was kinship-based.

The members of the Banana Poetry Club included Yurui's sister-in-law Feng Xian (冯娴), her daughter Qian Fenglun (钱凤, 1644-1703), her niece Chai Jingyi (柴静仪, d. 1680) and Gu Si (顾似), and her daughter-in-law Lin Yining (林以宁, 1655-after 1730). The members had close contact with each other and they often went on outings together during the spring and autumn to discuss poetry— they even held a poetry club meeting on a boat on West Lake.⁶⁷ They would miss each other if they had not seen each other for a long time. Compared with other gentry women poetry club members, their activities were freer than before. Although the Banana Poetry Club initially developed through kinship ties like those of other informal poetry clubs, the members of this particular club began to consciously dilute their familial relationships and

⁶⁷ Lin Yining 林以宁, “Ku Chai Jixian 哭柴季娴 [Crying for Chai Jixian]” *Poetry Collection from the Studio of Mo 墨庄诗抄* [The poetry of Mo manor] 2. 2.16a. (Beijing: Guo jia tu shu guan).

associated hierarchies. For example, they called the members of the poetry club “gentry friends” (闺友 *guiyou*), and “sisters” (姊妹 *disi*)⁶⁸ even if some of them were not of the same generation. They ignored their original kinship ties and emphasized that they were confidants with a shared interest in poetry. This consciousness was one of the reasons why the Banana Poetry Club developed into a formal female poetry club.

The development of a formal female poetry club was deeply influenced by their family environment. The Banana Garden Poetry Club had a spiritual leader named Gu Ruopu (顾若璞, 1592-ca.1681). Even though she was not an official member of the poetry club, she gave direction to the gentry women who were related to her and helped them form their poetry union. Ruopu had gained a name for chastity and filiality after her husband Huang Maowu (黄茂悟) died in 1619.⁶⁹ She received further education from her father-in-law and later became a kind of clan leader within her family. Ruopu firmly believed that the ability to read and understand classics was crucial to the cultivation of female morality. She even hired a teacher of the inner

⁶⁸ Wu, “Studies on The Banana Poetry Club,” 68.

⁶⁹ Chang and Saussy, “Gu Ruopu,” 302.

chambers to guide her female family members. It was her belief that gentry women could not be good wives and mothers without having a sufficient education.⁷⁰

The Banana Garden Poetry Club, as the most standardized and formal kinship-based female poetry club during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, serves as a link between the past and future in the development of female poetry clubs. It was founded under the considerable influence of a prestigious and influential female family leader that provided strong support for them in forming a poetry club and carrying out poetic activities. Moreover, as the club progressed, members increasingly gave their opinions without the constraints usually associated with hierarchical family relationships. In the later stage of the Banana Garden Poetry Club, members with no kinship ties were permitted to join which led to a transformation from a kinship-based female poetry club to a public-based community.⁷¹ The Banana Garden Poetry Club became the first women's literary society to transcend the boundaries of the family.⁷²

As Ko mentioned, over time there was a shift in female poetry clubs from the

⁷⁰ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, 180.

⁷¹ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, 251.

⁷² Berg and Starr, "Negotiating Gentility: The Banana Garden Poetry Club in Seventeenth-Century China," 77.

domestic sphere to the public sphere. The formation of public poetry clubs started when the kinship-based poetry clubs began to accept members from outside of the family, yet the kinship-based female poetry club remained the original foundation for these other types of female poetry clubs that were to emerge.

Although a large number of public poetry clubs began to appear in the middle and late Qing dynasty with society's affirmation of women's literary talent, the kinship-based female poetry clubs remained active. They remained closely associated with family ties and developed into more formal poetry clubs. For example, the Huanhua Poetry Club (浣花诗社) founded in 1867 by the Zeng family sisters and their mother in Sichuan province were active in the late Qing period. Two members of this female poetry club wrote poems titled "Song of the Huanhua Poetry club" as a way of recording their regular poetic activities.⁷³ At this time, the kinship-based female poetry club had a formal name and members wrote special poems based on the poetry club's name to describe their formal poetic activities. Since this thesis only

⁷³ Zuo Xijia 左锡嘉, "Huanhua shishe ge 浣花诗社歌 [Song of Huanhua Poetry Club]" in *Leng Yin Xian Guan Shi Gao* 冷吟仙馆诗稿 [The poetry of Lengyin Studio], 6.17a-6.17b. 1891.

<https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/details-poem.php?poemID=38219&language=ch>

discusses the development stage of the female poetry clubs during the late Ming and early Qing period, the later stage of kinship-based female poetry club will not be analyzed.

The significance of the family in imperial China laid the foundation for women's kinship-based poetry clubs. The common features of imperial Chinese families, such as patrilineal inheritance, patriarchal social structure, and virilocal residence, meant that women's lives were determined by their families during this period. With few exceptions, their lives were strictly regulated by their male family members.

The early female kinship-based poetry clubs developed among the gentry families. A gentry or influential family during the late imperial China not only possessed wealth, but was also the center for literary communication; they controlled the financial and literary resources that allowed female family members to obtain an education. This could also explain why early female poets and kinship-based poetry clubs were mostly concentrated in the Jiangnan region of China, one of the richest regions during the late Ming and early Qing period. The influential families in these

regions often allied with each other through marriage. Marriage helped gentry women to establish literary networks with their sisters, sisters-in-law and daughters when their activities were limited to within their families. With the increasing frequency of communication, gentry women evolved this kind of literary network into kinship-based poetry clubs. The Shen families, Qi families, the Banana Garden Poetry Club (during its early stage) and the Mingyuan Poetry Club were all typical examples of this sort of development. The family had various influences on the formation of these female kinship-based poetry clubs based on their geographical location, the inheritance of family learning practices, the choice of marriage, and the gentry women's lived experiences.

In the next two chapters, the Mingyuan Poetry Club will be discussed.

Compared with other later female poetry clubs like Huanhua Poetry Club, the Mingyuan Poetry Club was a typical informal family poetry club composed of gentry women. Evidence of the specific time of the poetry club's establishment and the origin of the poetry club's name cannot be found in the existing records. Based on existent sources, no information is available with regards to how they arrived at the

name Mingyuan Poetry Club; the name “Mingyuan”, which is more like a nickname, is used by other scholars of the same period and from later generations to refer to this particular kinship-based poetry club but there is no evidence available that illustrates this was the formal name of the poetry club. This lack of official record is in line with the typical characteristics of the early stages of female poetry clubs; that is, there were no formal regulations governing the founding of these poetry clubs. However, the name given by others to the Mingyuan Poetry Club not only reflects the social status of these female members in the Fang family, but also expresses that the reputation of the Fang sisters has been known to the outside world. And the five members are regarded as a kinship-based literary group, which is one step closer to the formal female poetry club of the Shen family and Shang family discussed earlier in this chapter.

The formation of the Mingyuan Poetry Club was closely related to their family culture. Their poetry not only reflects their life experience and emotions, but also reveals the social reality of their historical period. The Fang family experienced the decline and chaos of the late Ming dynasty and this turmoil is reflected in the

political themes of poems written by members of Mingyuan Poetry Club. These poetic works on different themes can help us to have a better understand of the living conditions of gentry women under particular political situations. In addition, the Mingyuan Poetry Club formed by the Fang sisters illustrates how gentry women assumed educational roles within the family.⁷⁴ The next two chapters will use the example of the Mingyuan Poetry Club formed by the Fang family to elaborate on the influences that led to the establishment of kinship-based female poetry club and will provide detailed analysis of their poetic works to show the significance of the Mingyuan Poetry Club.

⁷⁴ Xu Jie 许结, "Ming mo Tongcheng fangshi yu mingyuan shishe" 明末桐城方氏与名媛诗社 [The Fang family of Tongcheng and the Mingyuan Poetry Club in the late Ming], in *Ming Qing wenxue yu xingbie yanjiu* 明清文学与性别研究 [Literature and gender research in the Ming and Qing dynasty], ed. Zhang Hongsheng 张宏生 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chuban she, 2002), 349.

Chapter 4: Family Background and the Fang Family Mingyuan Poetry Club

The Mingyuan Poetry Club was known as the first female poetry club in Tongcheng city, Anhui province. The Mingyuan Poetry Club was engaged in poetic activities during the late Ming and the early Qing dynasties (around 1600 to 1670). Their activities included writing poems, sharing poems, and publishing works of poetry. This female poetry club was founded by five members, Fang Weiyi (1585-1668), the second sister in the Fang family; Fang Mengshi (1582-1639), the older sister of Fang Weiyi; Fang Weize,⁷⁵ the cousin of Weiyi who came from a famous gentry family in Tongcheng; Wu Lingyi (1593-1622), the sister-in-law of Weiyi; and Wu Lingze, Wu Lingyi's older sister who came from another influential gentry family in Tongcheng⁷⁶. Their publications include *Collection from the Studio of Clear Fragrance* (*Qingfen ge ji*, 清芬阁集), *Collection from the Studio of Renlan* (*Renlan ge ji*, 纫兰阁集), *Collection from the Studio of Maosong* (*Maosong ge ji*, 茂松阁集), *Posthumous Collection from the Chamber of Fupei* (*Fupeiju yi ji*, 黻佩居遗集), and

⁷⁵ There is no record of Fang Weize's birth and death dates. The only information we have is that she is the youngest sister of Fang Weiyi.

⁷⁶ There is no record of Wu Lingze's birth and death dates.

The Collection from the Hall of Huanzhu (Huanzhushi ji, 环珠室集) of which were recorded in the *History of the Ming*.⁷⁷

The members of the poetry club not only wrote and communicated through their poetic works but also frequently organized activities such as gatherings, seasonal festival celebrations and outings.⁷⁸ Sometimes, these occasions were mentioned in their poetry, giving insight into their personal experiences of life in a gentry family.

For example, Fang Weize wrote a poem entitled “Spending the Night with My Sister in the Studio of Clear Fragrance” (*Su zi qingfen ge, 宿姊清芬阁*). In the poem she describes her experience of staying at the house of another poetry club member, Fang Weiyi. In another poem, “My Older Sister Invited me to Xinyuan Building in the Late Spring, Having Dinner and Enjoying the Moon with Other Beauties” (*Muchun bozi zhao deng xinyuan lou tong zhu meiren yanyin wanyue, 暮春伯姊召登心远楼同诸美人宴饮玩月*), Fang Weiyi describes being invited by Fang Mengshi, her older

⁷⁷ In the thesis, the term “studio” is used in discussing the names of sisters’ poetic activity area. However, the five sisters used different Chinese terms with similar meanings to point their poetic studios, here I just choose the English words interchangeably despite slight differences in the Chinese terminology.

⁷⁸ Dong Jiabei 董佳贝, *17-18 shi ji Tongcheng shen shi jia zu gui xiu yan jiu* 17-18 世纪桐城绅士家族闺秀研究 [The study of Tongcheng gentry women in gentry family in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries] (Shanghai: Hua dong shi fan da xue chu ban she, 2017), 162.

sister and fellow poetry club member, to enjoy the moonlight with other gentry

women:

柔桑布谷鸣，引袂叙平生。

The cuckoo called on the newly sprouting mulberry tree, holding on to each other's

clothes, women tell of their lives.

.....

绮罗娇国色，檀板杂歌声。

The beauties are all outstanding, the sandalwood percussion mixed with everyone's

singing.

These two lines describe the scene of these gentry women at an outdoor party. The events recorded in this poem show that the activities of these gentry women poets of Tongcheng included evening gatherings.

In the study of female poets and female poetry clubs, the literary works and poetry of the Shen family, Qi family and the Banana Garden Poetry Club have long been studied by Chinese scholars and other scholars abroad. However, there are few

studies on the Fang sisters. Fang Weiyi's poetry and painting has received the most scholarly attention, but there has been very little research on the works and lives of the other members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club and there have been no English translations of their poetic works. This chapter hopes to redress that gap in scholarship and not only provide a close examination of the lives of members of the club but also provide a collection of translations for use by future scholars interested in studying women's poetry from the late Ming and early Qing period. This will allow audiences to have a more comprehensive understanding of the life and social conditions of the gentry women who founded this kinship-based poetry club as well as provide insight into the influence that family had on all aspects in the formation of the group.

The Influence of Location on the Mingyuan Poetry Club

Gentry women were a comparatively disadvantaged social group during the late Ming period. Confucian etiquette dictated that women's behavior follow certain norms. The primary role of women was to be obedient to the male members of their family. Therefore, family values had a considerable impact on their lives and the

literature they created. The family values embodied by these influential families also had a significant impact on the local values and cultural atmosphere of the city in which they lived. To analyze the family influences on the formation of the Mingyuan Poetry Club, it is necessary to discuss the local values and cultural atmosphere of Tongcheng.

Tongcheng, the city where the Mingyuan Poetry Club was located, is north of the Yangtze River and south of the Huai River.

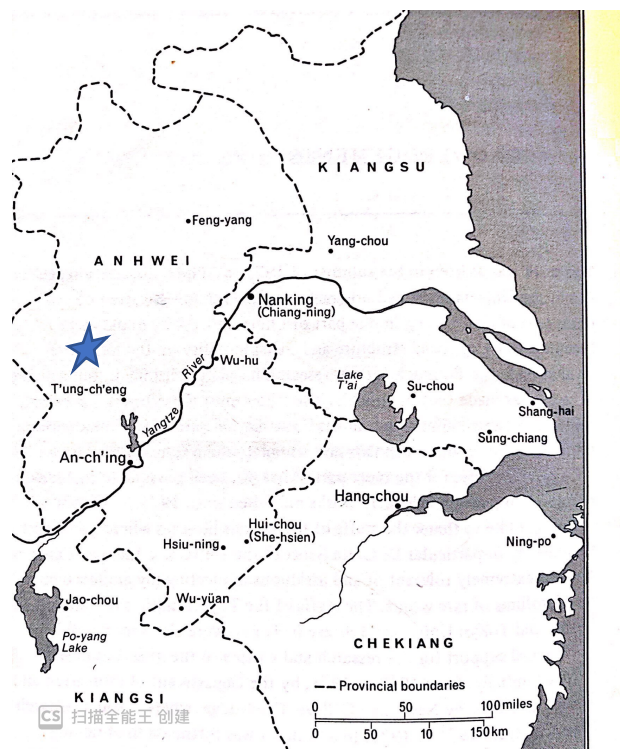


Figure.1 The Yangtze valley in the Qing dynasty⁷⁹

⁷⁹ The map comes from Beattie, Hilary J. *Land and Lineage in China*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.), x. The city name “T’ung-ch’eng” showed in the Figure 2 is the Wade-Giles romanization system for the Mandarin Chinese. The name “Tongcheng” is the official romanization system for Standard Chinese in mainland China.

Although the geographical position of this city seems very important, prior to the Ming dynasty the culture of Tongcheng city was relatively weak. According to the Tongcheng County Gazetteer Kangxi Edition (edited around 1700), there were only ten individuals who became scholar-officials prior to the Ming dynasty.⁸⁰ From the Ming period to the early Qing, a large number of scholars suddenly emerged in Tongcheng city. The Tongcheng County Gazetteer Kangxi Edition recorded 83 scholars who passed the highest Imperial Examination during the entire Ming period (1368-1644). Of these, 63 of them appeared between 1522 and 1644. The Tongcheng County Gazetteer Kangxi Edition (edited around 1826) listed 108 scholars from this city who passed the highest Imperial Examination between 1644 and 1826. In other words, it can be seen from this data that the cultural atmosphere and number of educated elites in Tongcheng had transformed radically since the establishment of the Ming dynasty, reaching its peak during the Qing dynasty.

⁸⁰ Kangxi Tongcheng Xian Zhi 康熙桐城县志 [Tongcheng County Gazetteer Kangxi edition] No. 3, as quoted in Sturgeon (2011). Locations of the textual references given in this paper can also be determined using the Chinese Text Project website: <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=116931&page=9&remap=gb>

The famous historian Li Zegang (李则纲, 1892-1977) from Anhui province mentioned four factors that influenced the intense cultural atmosphere of Tongcheng: proximity to the capital city, a large number of immigrants moving to the Tongcheng area during the Yuan period, the geographical location of the city and people of insight returning to Tongcheng (as a result of government corruption) and bringing their knowledge to share with the local community.⁸¹

First, the Ming government replaced the Yuan dynasty (ruled by Mongols) in 1368 and set up the capital city in Nanjing. A large number of officials were needed for the new dynasty. The court attached importance to the imperial examinations so that they could select the most talented scholars. The distance between Tongcheng and Nanjing was only 200 kilometers, which made Tongcheng susceptible to the cultured atmosphere of the capital city. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the number of scholars who passed the highest Imperial Examination in the Ming dynasty was eight times the sum of all before.

⁸¹ Li Zegang 李则纲, *Anhui Li Shi Shu Yao* 安徽历史述要 [The description of history in Anhui Province] (Anhui: Anhui sheng di fang zhi bian zuan wei yuan hui, 1982), 10

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, under the influence of the imperial examination system, Tongcheng people often traveled to cultural centres such as Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou to attend cultural activities.⁸² Although the Ming dynasty moved the capital city to Beijing later, Nanjing still retained a complete set of government departments. Therefore, Tongcheng city was deeply influenced by the cultural centre of China at that time. Secondly, after the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), many immigrants moved to Tongcheng. Most of the influential families in the Ming and Qing dynasty were not the local people in Tongcheng city. The famous scholar named Wu Rulun (吴汝纶, 1840-1903) in the Qing dynasty mentioned that most of the influential families in Tongcheng during the Ming and Qing dynasties were not local to the area and most of the immigrants came from Jiangxi province and the Huizhou area. However, the reasons for this migration to Tongcheng is still not apparent.⁸³ After more than one hundred years of cultivation and development, these immigrant families living in Tongcheng gradually became stable and had become

⁸² Dong, *The Study of Tongcheng Gentry Women in Gentry Family in the Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, 2

⁸³ Wu Rulun 吴汝纶, *Wu Rulun quanji* 吴汝纶全集 [The literary collection of Wu Rulun], as quoted in Sturgeon (2011). Locations of the textual references given in this paper can also be determined using the Chinese Text Project website: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=649721&remap=gb>

wealthy by the middle of the Ming dynasty. The demand for culture usually develops in-step with the growth of economy.

Thirdly, the development of human society is inextricably linked to geography.

Different geographical environments often produce different regional cultures.

China's geographical environment has influenced the political structure, economic form, cultural progress and characteristics of its people. Tongcheng is surrounded by mountains and streams and close to the Yangtze River, forming a unique regional culture that is both geographically closed and open. On the one hand, the surrounding mountains formed the relatively closed inland environment of the city. Although Tongcheng is not far from prosperous cities such as Nanjing, Hangzhou, and Suzhou, it was not easily affected by external culture like the other coastal cities. It maintained relative cultural independence. Most of the influential families in Tongcheng city attached importance to cultivation and education, paying attention to the Confucian code of ethics and maintaining the typical Confucian cultural traditions, which in turn allowed the city to maintain a relatively independent cultural environment.

The surrounding mountains and streams formed a beautiful natural scenery. The poetic works of Tongcheng poets are mostly elegant and natural, showing the considerable influence of the surrounding natural environment. Members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club created numerous verses describing landscapes, and they expressed their thoughts and emotions by describing natural scenery in poems. Related to the unsatisfactory life of the poetry club members and their sensitive characteristic, their poetic works were more likely to use natural scenes reflecting moods of sadness. For example, Fang Weiyi's poem addressed to Wu Lingyi "Thoughts of Mrs. Maosong at the Yangtze River" (*Chujiang huai wu mei Maosongge*, 楚江怀吴妹茂松阁),

空林陨叶暮乌啼, Through the fallen leaves of empty forests cries the evening crow,
 云汉迢迢隔皖溪。 The Milky Way lies in the distance, beyond the river Wan.
 夜发苍梧寒梦远, Our late-night departure from Cangwu - a wintry dream now far;
 楚天明月照楼西。 A gleaming moon of southern skies shines west of the pavilion.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Chang and Saussy, "Shen Yixiu and Her Daughters, Ye Wanwan, Ye Xiaoman, and Ye Xiaoluan," 286.

The title of this poem is about Fang Weiyi missing her sister-in-law; however, all four lines describe scenes from nature. Instead of directly expressing her feeling of missing her sister-in-law, the poet uses descriptions of the landscape, such as “fallen”, “empty”, “cries”, “wintry dream”, to express her sadness. Moreover, the beautiful natural scenery also attracted the gathering of a large number of talents from other places, laying the foundation for the formation of influential families in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

As shown in figure 2, there are a large number of rivers and lakes around Tongcheng. The land is fertile and suitable for farming, thereby forming a typical farming culture there.

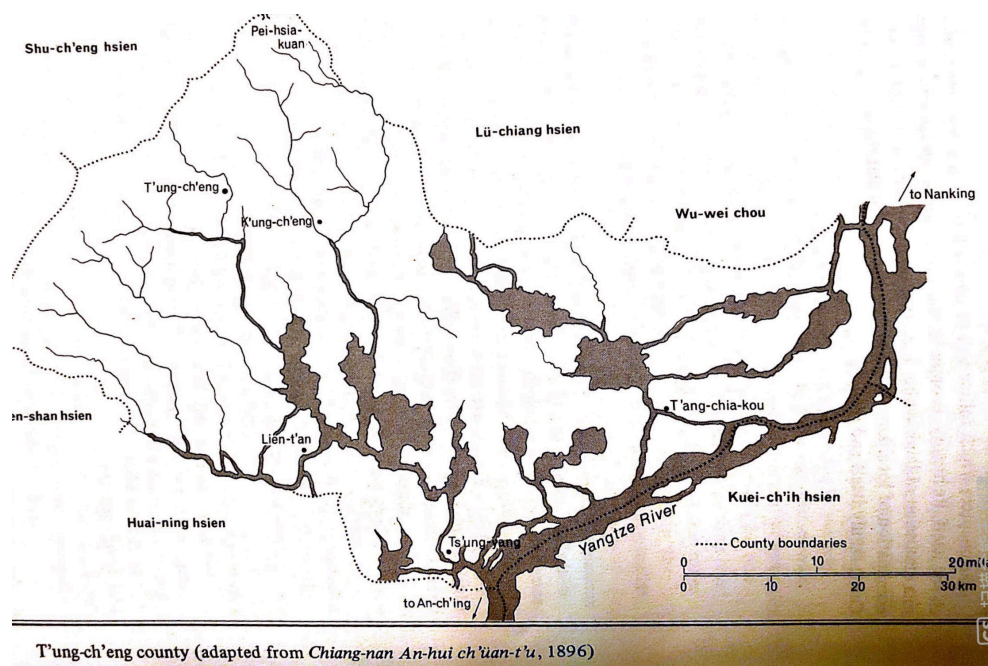


Figure 2 Map of Tongcheng⁸⁵

Under the influence of this type of culture, the behavior of the city inhabitants tends to be down-to-earth and influenced by local customs. Zhang Ying (张英, 1638-1708), prime minister of the Qing dynasty in the 17th century was born in Tongcheng and mentioned that most of the people from this city always do things aboveboard and that officials from Tongcheng were famous for advising the emperor frankly; such praise from the prime minister was possibly a form of self-promotion for the local people and himself.⁸⁶ As a result, the location and geographical environment attracted immigrants to settle here. After the Ming dynasty established Nanjing as its capital city, the close connection between Tongcheng and Nanjing helped culture develop rapidly. Some of the families gradually became influential families in Tongcheng after several members gained official positions through the imperial examination. The geographical environment also had an impact on their family culture after the formation of locally influential families. The Fang family learning

⁸⁵ Beatty, *Land and Lineage in China*, 22.

⁸⁶ Zhang Ying 张英, “Longmian guwen chu ji xu” 龙眠古文初集序 [Preface of Longmian’s Antique], in *Du su tang wen ji* 笃素堂文集 [Literature collection of Dusu Studio] as quoted in Sturgeon (2011). Locations of the textual references given in this paper can also be determined using the Chinese Text Project website:

<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=377274&remap=gb>

combined both the conservative and open school of Neo-Confucian. As mentioned earlier, the geographic location of Tongcheng was both closed and open. On the one hand, Tongcheng was surrounded by mountains, therefore, the local culture would be relatively fixed and not easily influenced by outside cultures. The conservative Neo-Confucian School of Principle and Reason played a significant role in the city. On the other hand, Tongcheng's location was nearby to the late Ming government's capital city of Nanjing. Men who want to take the imperial examination had to travel to the capital and these candidates would bring Nanjing's popular culture and teachings back to their hometown. Therefore, the influential families of Tongcheng were also familiar with the Neo-Confucian School of Mind.

The Fang family represents a typical elite family of the time. Quite a few of its members passed the imperial examination. They received teachings from the two schools and by the eleventh generation of the Fang family, Fang Xuejian (方学渐), they had gradually mixed the two schools of philosophy and proposed a unique style of family learning which laid the foundation for the Mingyuan Poetry Club.

The Family Learning (家学) of the Fang family

Family learning refers to the knowledge and learning passed down from generation to generation in a family. A famous Chinese scholar Chen Yinke pointed out that one of the most characteristic features of the gentry family was the inheritance of family learning.⁸⁷ It can be said that family learning is a distinctive feature of a gentry family. There are three Fang families in Tongcheng city, namely Guilin Fang, Huigong Fang, and Luhong Fang. The latter two were named after their residential area. The Guilin (桂林, laurel forest) Fang is the family where the Mingyuan Poetry Club came into being. Tongcheng city's education official named Xu Hao (徐灏) mentioned the origins of the Guilin Fang family in his 1493 preface to "*Guilin Fang's Genealogy in Tongcheng*." According to Xu, the Guilin Fang family first lived in Guangxin city (广信), Jiangxi province (north of Anhui province). In the early years of the Yuan dynasty, they moved to Tongcheng.⁸⁸ The origin of Guilin Fang's name is uncertain. Some people think that the two characters "*Guilin*" have the meaning of emblems of victory, which is used to express the number of men in the

⁸⁷ Chen Yinke 陈寅恪, *Tangdai zhengshi shi zhulun gao* 唐代政治史述论稿 [Exposition on the political history in the Tang dynasty] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982), 71-72.

⁸⁸ Fang Chuanli 方传理, "*Juan shou.qian kan jiapu yuan xu*" 卷首.前刊家谱原序 [Preface. The original version of genealogical tree], in *Tongcheng Guilin Fang shi jiapu* 桐城桂林方式家谱 [The genealogical tree of Guilin Fang family in Tongcheng] (Hefei: Anhui shifan da xue chu ban she, 2006), 1.

family passing the imperial examination. Some people think that it is because the seventh generation was named for Fang You (方佑, 1419-?), who became the governor of Guangxi province in Guilin city.

Since the seventh generation, the Fang family gradually began to gain fame in the imperial examinations and some members became officials in the government.

However, the family learning of the Guilin Fang family began in the eleventh generation with Fang Xuejian (1540-1615), the grandfather of Fang Weiyi (Zhu, 1990).⁸⁹ According to *The Biographies of Individuals in Tongcheng City*, Fang Xuejian refused to attend the imperial examination. He gradually founded his academy and taught for more than twenty years. His students called him the Master of Mingshan (明善 meaning “bright-eyed and kind”).⁹⁰ Fang Xuejian criticized what he saw as false doctrine and set practical learning as the central direction of his family learning.

Neo-Confucianism became the orthodox imperial ideology in China after the Song dynasty (960-1279). A kind of revival of traditional Confucian philosophy and

⁸⁹ Zhu, *Notes on Poetry in Jingzhi House: The Poetry Collection of Jingzhi Studio*, 425.

⁹⁰ Ma Qichang 马其昶, “Fang Mingshan xiansheng zhuan” 方明善先生传 [The biography of Fang Mingshan] *Tongcheng qi jiu zhuan* 桐城耆旧传 [The biographies of individuals in Tongcheng City] (Anhui: Huangshan shu she, 2013), 151.

political culture, it applies some Taoist and Buddhist theories to Confucianism. In the period when Fang Xuejian lived, two different doctrines developed within Neo-Confucianism: The School of Principle and Reason by Cheng Yi (程颐, 1033-1107) and Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200), and the School of Mind or Intuition by Wang Yangming (1472-1529). In Neo-Confucianism, the word “principle” (*li*, 理) is the inner meaning of this philosophy. However, the two schools have different explanations of “*li*.” The School of Principle and Reason thinks that *li* or principle is the true nature in man, which is fundamentally good. Moreover, the mind of an individual can combine with the mind of the universe, so that it is capable of understanding the principles of all things.⁹¹ They insist that external rationality from the universe is more important when there is a conflict between reason and mind because all things have their immaterial and immutable principles. Therefore, this kind of doctrine advocates that individuals should uphold justice and abolish

⁹¹ Theodore de Bary, Wing-tsit Chan, and Burton Watson, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 534.

selfishness.⁹² The School of Mind thinks that *Li* or principle comes from the people's mind itself, in which all things from the universe are contained within the mind of the individual. It insists that the “good knowledge,” which means the mind in its natural purity and perfection, comes from the individual's innate sense.⁹³ This school broke away from the more orthodox teachings of the School of Principle and Reason, and instead emphasized individualism and cultivation of the self.

Under the influences of these two doctrines, the Fang family learning created by Fang Xuejian combined the two different theories to some extent. His central ideology was based upon the School of Mind. He agreed that the *Li* or principle equals the mind, and considered there is no other universe outside the individual's mind.⁹⁴ He also believed that human nature is inherently good. Good nature is born within people and does not require any outside power.⁹⁵ Xuejian considered the core

⁹² Zhu Xi, 朱熹, *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子语类 [A collection of conversations of Master Zhu] 卷十一 No. 11, as quoted in Sturgeon (2011). Locations of the textual references given in this paper can also be determined using the

Chinese Text Project website: <https://ctext.org/zhuzi-yulei/zhs>

“圣贤千言万语，只是教人明天理，灭人欲” All of the words said by the sages are only to teach people to upload the justice and abolish the selfishness.

⁹³ Bary, Chan, and Watson, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 570.

⁹⁴ Fang Xuejian 方学渐, “Xinxue zong” 心学宗 [School of Mind Sect] (Beijing: Guo jia tu shu guan) *Siku quanshu ben* 四库全书本. (Beijing: Guo jia tu shu guan), 12, 127.

⁹⁵ Fang Xuejian 方学渐, *Xingshan yi* 性善绎 [The explanation of good nature] as quoted in Sturgeon (2011). Locations of the textual references given in this paper can also be determined using the Chinese Text Project website: <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&res=89280&remap=gb>

value of good nature to be the goodness of the entity, not an illusion or product of the imagination. Therefore, he opposed Buddhist or Daoist style practices of meditation, insisting that only specific Confucian virtues and moral norms could enrich individuals' good nature.⁹⁶ The practical learning of Neo-Confucianism is the most important. He gradually believed that not only the specific history and verifiable facts belong to the practical learning, but also the principle. The development of facts is dominated by the practical principle, so the principle should be considered as either practical or true learning.⁹⁷ However, the practical learning created by Xuejian is different from the philology or ascertainable research that emerged in the Qing dynasty. Qing classicists prefer the empirical approach by discussing the concrete facts, verifiable institutions, ancient natural studies, and historical events. They saw the principle of "Learning of the Way" in the Song and Ming dynasty as an obstacle

⁹⁶ Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲, *Mingru xue'an* "Ming ru xue an 明儒学案 [Records of Ming Scholars] 卷三十五, No. 35, as quoted in Sturgeon (2011). Locations of the textual references given in this paper can also be determined using the Chinese Text Project website: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=149761&remap=gb> "性则心之所具之理, 儒言性善, 是见性之本源.....释以空为性, 虽谓山河大地皆佛性, 其意悉归之空; 老氏炼神还虚, 则又以气之清虚者为性, 见益浅矣." Human nature is the principle of the mind. The Confucian says that human nature is inherently good at birth because they already understand the source or origin of humanity... The Buddhist thinks human nature is empty, although it believes all of the mountains, rivers, and the earth are a buddha. The meaning of Buddhism is that all things in the universe are empty. The Taoist pays attention to the spiritual cultivation of the energy of the brain and believes that the emptiness of the life force is the human nature. These two views are shallow.

⁹⁷ Fang, *School of the Mind Sect*, 127.

to true learning.⁹⁸ Although the practical learning in Fang family learning was not the same as philology or true learning in the Qing dynasty, many Qing classicists still treated Fang Yizhi, the great-great-grandson of Fang Xuejian, as the pioneer of philology even though the philology or true learning believers completely ignored the influence of the Song Ming Neo-Confucianism.⁹⁹

To understand the influence of Fang Xuejian on Fang family learning it is important to study and explain the Confucian classic theory and practice the traditionally Confucian ethical standards of family learning. He established the ancestral temple and edited the family tree into a book, which followed the Neo-Confucian style family rules.¹⁰⁰ The strict family rules and rituals that the family members must obey are close to the School of Principle and Reason. The genealogy book of the Fang family expressly stipulated the correct family rituals for family members. For example, it contained instructions on how to address peers in the family

⁹⁸ Benjamin Elman, "Early Modern or Late Imperial Philology? The Crisis of Classical Learning in Eighteenth Century China," *Frontiers of History in China* 6, no. 1 (October 2011): 3-25. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11462-011-0118-z>.

⁹⁹ Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 2001), 40.

¹⁰⁰ Ma, "The biography of Fang Xuejian," 152. "捐金创祠堂，篆家乘，……一准古礼。" He spent money to establish the ancestral temple, wrote the family tree...followed the traditional Confucian rituals.

and how to make greetings to older family members and younger generations upon meeting in the street, and so on.

The family rituals created by Fang Xuejian also had strict rules for female family members. He believed that the fundamental task of the female is to continue the family line and to obey her husband and elders. He regulated the behaviors and virtues of daughters and daughters-in-law in the family, and the rules made female family members conform to traditional social values and the moral standards of the School of Principle and Reason.¹⁰¹

The family learning in the Fang family was the combination of Wang Yangming's School of Mind and Zhu Xi's School of Principle and Reason. The School of Mind emphasizes individualism and cultivation of the self; it considers everyone as equal to some extent and even advocates some forms of gender equality. For instance, one of the more controversial figures of this School, Li Zhi (1527-1602), briefly discussed issues of gender equality. He considered that people's ability to learn was determined by the environment in which people live instead of innate

¹⁰¹ Song Haofei 宋豪飞, *Ming Qing Tongcheng Fang shi ji qi shige yanjiu* 明清桐城方氏及其诗歌研究 [The Fang family of Tongcheng and their poetic works in Ming and Qing dynasty] (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2012), 410-414.

gender differences.¹⁰² The School of Mind changed the standard by which males evaluated females. Therefore, this explains why the female family members in the Fang family at the time could receive an orthodox education at home. They learned Confucian classic theory and writing skills in poetry.

Xuejian's family rules did not mention how these female family members received education. There are no primary sources to describe how the Fang sisters of the Mingyuan Poetry Club received an education, but they did receive a high level of education from their family. According to the descriptions of their next generation male family members, it could be ascertained that female members were educated by their parents. For example, Weiyi's nephew, Fang Yizhi indicated in his preface to Weiyi's poetry collection that his mother died young and his father was an official in other cities. Yizhi's education was completed by his second aunt Weiyi. He states, "My mother died when I was twelve years old, and my aunt taught me the *Record of*

¹⁰² Li Zhi 李贽, "Da yi nvren xue dao wei jian duan shu" 答以女人学道为见短书. [Letter in Reply to "Women are short-sighted so that they cannot learn Daoism"], in *Fen shu, xu fen shu* 焚书, 续焚书 [A Book for Burning: A Book for Burning, Sequel] (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 2009).

Rituals and Encountering Sorrow.”¹⁰³ Yizhi’s son, Fang Zhonglü (方中履) wrote that, “At that time, my father was twelve years old and my aunt was nine years old. They were both raised and educated by their second aunt, Fang Weiyi. Weiyi taught them painting, history and etiquette. She was like their mother and teacher.”¹⁰⁴ From Zhonglü’s description, Weiyi provided the enlightenment education to her nephew and niece together. This situation indicates the female family members in the Fang family most likely received a fairly broad literary education in the classics and histories which allowed them to write poetry and form poetry clubs together.

However, there were strict rules for female family members due to the Fang family learning. In Zhou Wanqie’s research on Tongcheng women, she asserts that the moral behavior of local women was basically centered on concepts of female virtue and filial piety. The upper-class families in Tongcheng paid great attention to the promotion of female virtue and the values of heroic female martyrdom.¹⁰⁵ This

¹⁰³ Fang Yizhi 方以智, “Qingfenge ji ba” 清芬阁集跋 [The preface of collection from the Studio of Clear Fragrance] *Fu shan wen ji* 浮山文集 [Literary works in Fu Mountain] (Beijing: Hua xia chu ban she, 2017), 40. “智十二丧母, 《礼记》、《离骚》, 皆姑授也”

¹⁰⁴ Dong, *The Study of Tongcheng Gentry Women in Gentry Family in the Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuri*, 135. “时先公十二岁, 恭人九岁, 皆育于仲姑清芬阁, 世所称姚节妇也, 恭人学图史礼法, 清芬实兼母与师。”

¹⁰⁵ Zhou Wanqie 周婉窃, “Qingdai Tongcheng xuezhe yu funv de jiduan daode xingwei” 清代桐城学者与妇女的极端道德行为 [The extreme moral behaviors of Tongcheng’s scholars and women in the Qing dynasty], *Dalu zazhi* 大陆杂志 87, no.4: 158.

was standard for women of their class at this time. The life experiences of the Fang sisters indicates that they adhered to the Neo-Confucian ideal of female virtue and moral standards of etiquette.

Under the restrictions of family regulations, they could not leave the home of their own free will and communicate with other literati during this period. Therefore, the female family members in the Fang family could only discuss literary knowledge and poetic works with other female relatives during family gatherings. Family gatherings became the best opportunity for academic discussion. Furthermore, as stated in the previous paragraph, the family rules of the Fang family carefully regulated how family members interacted with one another including how female family members behaved. The Fang family learning made the Fang sisters, their cousins, and Wu Lingyi, who later married into the Fang family, work hard to manage close family relationships, chant poetry, and communicate with each other. In other words, family learning lay the foundation for the Fang sisters to form the Mingyuan Poetry Club.

As the previous paragraphs indicates, the Fang family learning combined the teachings of the School of Mind and the School of Principle and Reason. On one hand, the Fang family learning constrained the female behavior and virtues based on the School of Principle and Reason. On the other hand, the female family members of the Fang family gained an orthodox education based on the principles of the School of Mind. The family learning provided the opportunity to receive education and laid the ideological foundation for gentry women.

Family gatherings were the best place for these female members to communicate about literary and poetry creation. These conditions determined why the kinship-based female poetry club first emerged for gentry women. The five members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club came from two influential families in Tongcheng with similar family learning backgrounds. However, their life experiences and family life after marriage also had a great influence on their poetic works, as well as on the process of forming the poetry club together.

Marriage relationship

In addition to family learning, marriage was another familial factor influencing the formation of female poetry clubs. In imperial China, marriage connected not only the different genders but also two families and clans. Marriage often became the primary source of happiness or sorrow in a woman's life. Upper-class families would take pedigree as the primary consideration in arranging a marriage. For female family members who were relatively vulnerable in society, selecting a marriage with matched pedigree was a way to minimize the possible harm to gentry women.

Intermarriage between the elite families in Tongcheng was the standard practice. For example, the eldest daughter of the Fang family, Fang Mengshi, married into the Zhang family. Her husband's nephew and grandson later became prime ministers of the Qing government. Fang Weiyi, the second daughter of the Fang family, married into the Yao family. Her father-in-law was a sub-prefectural magistrate. Wu Lingyi, who married into the Fang family and became a member of the Mingyuan Poetry Club, was the daughter of the famous Neo-Confucianist Wu Yingbin (吴应宾, 1564-1635) in Tongcheng. In the Tongcheng gentry families, matched marriages guaranteed a similar knowledge level, making it easy for husband and wife to form a

close relationship. Many of the poems created by members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club express their love and affection for their husbands.

However, under the shadow of Neo-Confucian traditional ethics, the requirement for raising children was often deemed essential within the marriage. Some of the wives of the Tongcheng gentry families from the 16th to the 17th centuries were unable to fulfil their perceived duties in this regard. Many couples in their youth had difficulty having children or their children frequently died in infancy. The origin of this distress was more likely due to the continuous intermarriage between influential individual families during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Such close intermarriages resulted in the weak constitution of many male and female members of the gentry families and they suffered from illness in childhood and adulthood.¹⁰⁶ Among the members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club, the husbands of Fang Weiyi and Fang Weize both died prematurely due to illness.

Communication and gatherings with other female family members became a way to come to terms with the loneliness brought on by widowhood. Moreover,

¹⁰⁶ Dong, *The Study of Tongcheng Gentry Women in Gentry Family in the Seventeenth-eighteenth Century*, 78.

because these gentry women's husbands came from influential families, many were government officials. While some women chose to go with their husbands when they worked outside of their hometown, some gentry women chose to stay in their hometown to better raise their children. The Fang sisters' sister-in-law, Wu Lingyi, was one of them; when her husband Fang Kongzhao became an official in another province, she took her children to live in her husband's parent's house. Therefore, she became very close to Fang Weiyi, who returned to her parent's home after becoming a widow and formed the Mingyuan Poetry Club together with her sisters-in-law. The following paragraphs will introduce the life experiences in their family of the five members to demonstrate the impact on their poetic works and the forming of the Mingyuan Poetry Club.

Fang Weiyi

The key person of the Mingyuan Poetry Club was Fang Weiyi, who was already a well-known poet of the time. Her poetry anthology *Collection from the Studio of Clear Fragrance* was highly praised and respected by scholars during the late Ming and the early Qing period. Two of the Three Great Poetry Masters of the

Qing¹⁰⁷ Zhu Yizun (朱彝尊, 1629-1709) and Chen Weisong (陈维崧, 1625-1682)

both commented on Weiyi's poetry. Zhu Yizun discussed Weiyi's work in his *Notes*

on Poetry in Jingzhi House (*Jingzhiju shihua*, 静志居诗话): "Most of the women in

Longmian are very talented in literary pursuits. Here, the Fang family and the Wu

family provide the greatest number of talented women. Among so many talented

women, Mrs. Fang's (Fang Weiyi) talent is the most outstanding. Her poetry avoids

complicated rhetoric and straightforwardly shows her feelings and opinions."¹⁰⁸

Moreover, all members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club were from the two famous

families (Fang family and Wu family), according to Zhu Yizun. Chen Weisong said in

his work *The Collected Works of Women* (*Furen ji*, 妇人集): "The horizons of essay

and poetry from *Collection from the Studio of Clear Fragrance* written by Fang

Weiyi in Tongcheng are very broad and forward-looking. It is only Mrs. Cao [Ban

Zhao's] talent and achievements which are superior to hers."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Later generations of scholars believe that Zhu Yizun, Chen Weisong, and Nalan Xingde have the highest achievements in poetry, so they are called the Three Poetry Masters in the Qing dynasty.

¹⁰⁸ Zhu, *Notes on Poetry in Jingzhi House*, 725. "龙眠闺阁多才，方、吴二门称盛。夫人才尤杰出。其诗一洗铅华，归于质直"

¹⁰⁹ Chen Weisong 陈维崧, *Fu ren ji* 妇人集 [*The Collected Works of Women*], as quoted in Sturgeon (2011).

Locations of the textual references given in this paper can also be determined using the Chinese Text Project

website: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=714439&remap=gb>

Weiwei was the second daughter in the Fang family of Tongcheng. When she was seventeen years old, she married Yao Sunqi (姚孙棨), who also came from a famous family in Tongcheng. Weiwei's husband had been ill for six years before they got married. Yao died of illness in September during their second year of marriage. Weiwei fell into great sorrow due to the death of her husband. She wrote down her feelings in her essay *Widow's Narrative* (*Weiwangren Weisheng Shu*, 未亡人微生述): "He died in September, I screamed in sorrow to heaven, but heaven did not respond to me. I wanted to commit suicide to accompany my husband, but I found myself pregnant."¹¹⁰ However, destiny was very unfair to Weiwei. She gave birth to a daughter after her husband died but her daughter died of illness, too, when she was nine months old. After her daughter's death, Weiwei returned to her parent's home and stayed with her brothers. According to Chinese family tradition, the wife is a member of the husband's family and should stay at her husband's house to take care of in-laws even after her husband's death. However, as Fang Weiwei accounts in *Widow's*

“桐城姚夫人名维仪……所著《清芬阁集》，文章宏瞻，亚于曹大家矣！”。Mrs. Cao's original name is Ban Zhao, who is one of the best historians and writers who lived from 45C.E. to 117C.E. Later she entered into court and became the teacher of the empress of the Han.

¹¹⁰ The essay recorded in Ma Qichang's *Tongcheng Qi Jiu Zhuan*, 456. “至九月大渐，伤痛呼天，而莫之应也。遗腹存身，未敢殉死”

Narrative, her father-in-law had become an official and was living in another province with her mother-in-law when her husband died. Weiyi stayed at her husband's house to take care of her husband's grandparents. At this time, she said that she was poor and lacking in food and clothing.¹¹¹ To make matters worse, people began to spread gossip, breaking the relationship between the Fang family and the Yao family. Three years after the death of her husband, she was forced to return to her parent's home.¹¹² *Widow's Narrative* reflects Weiyi's painful and difficult life as a widow. The difficulties expressed here are not only economic, but also social as she deals with the rumours that surround her. From her essay, we can see the tremendous psychological pressure widows must endure.

Weiyi named her studio at her parents and brother's home, Studio of Clear Fragrance which means clear water and delicate fragrance. Most of her poetic works were finished in the Studio of Clear Fragrance. Therefore, her published poetry collection was entitled *Collection from the Studio of Clear Fragrance*.

¹¹¹ It was a strange thing that Fang Weiyi became poor after her husband died. The Yao family was still an influential family in Tongcheng although Weiyi's parents-in-law were officials in another province at that time. Therefore, the daughter-in-law who took care of grandparents in her husband's family should not be lacking in food and clothing. It can only be guessed that the relationship between Weiyi and her husband's family was not harmonious at that time. Weiyi mentioned in her essay that her husband's three younger brothers gave fields to her for rent collection until her father-in-law died. The reason why she got the fields was the three younger brothers of Weiyi's husband pitied her for living as a widow for more than 20 years.

¹¹² Ma, "Widow's Narrative," 734.

Although Fang Weiyi was talented in writing poetry, she did not want to become famous. In a letter she wrote to her nephew Fang Yizhi (1611-1671), she reminded him not to give her poetry collection to others at will. She actually did not want others to know her talents.¹¹³ Fang Yizhi mentions in his preface to his aunt's poetry collection in 1629 that Weiyi often had regrets about not being able to make a contribution to her country like a man. She compiled a book called *The Poetry History of the Inner Chambers* (*Gonggui shishi* 宫闺诗史); however, because she felt that women should not be known for their literary talents, she destroyed the manuscript. Even her poetry collection was selected and published by her sister Fang Mengshi rather than by herself.¹¹⁴ Mengshi mentions in her preface to *Collection from the Studio of Clear Fragrance* that Weiyi was unwilling to show off her talents. She often burned her newly finished poems. Mengshi believed that her sister was the most talented woman during that period in time. However, Weiyi rejected her talents.¹¹⁵ From the description by Weiyi's sister and nephew, it is obvious that her cruel fate made Weiyi doubt her destiny and female identity. As mentioned before,

¹¹³ Fu, "A Letter to My Nephew," 163.

¹¹⁴ Fang, "The Preface of Collection from the Studio of Clear Fragrance," 40.

¹¹⁵ Fu, A Preface to Sister Weiyi of Collection from the Studio of Clear Fragrance, 130.

Weiyi regretted she was a woman because her identity as a woman closed off many paths. Therefore, she treated her talents negatively. However, she did not give up writing poetry even though she was in pain. Weiyi left numerous excellent works of poetry through her participation in the Mingyuan Poetry Club.

After Weiyi returned to her parent's home, Weiyi's cousin Fang Weize visited her quite frequently. Weize had become a widow at sixteen as well. Due to their similar plight, their relationship became close. Weiyi's elder sister Fang Mengshi also frequently visited Weiyi, even after she got married, as did the wife of Weiyi's younger brother Wu Lingyi, who lived with Weiyi in the Fang family home. Lingyi's elder sister Wu Lingze, who visited her sister at the home of her in-laws, often joined the others in Weiyi's studio. Therefore, it seemed natural that the five sisters in the Fang and Wu clans came together and established the Mingyuan Poetry Club. Weiyi's studio, The Studio of Clear Fragrance, later became the center of activity for the group. Weiyi was the key figure or leader in the poetry club. Weiyi's nephew, as well as Wu Lingyi's son, Fang Yizhi, wrote, "My aunt (Weiyi) and my mother stay together from morning to night since 1606. They usually wrote poetry

together. And when my elder aunts (Fang Mengshi and Wu Lingze) came to visit, they wrote and read poetry in the inner quarter. And the inner quarter was in harmony at that time.”¹¹⁶

In many of her works, Weiyi expressed her sorrowful life experiences and emotions in her poems. What is remarkable is that her poetry not only expressed personal emotions but also paid attention to the political situation. Just as the male poets did, many of her works blended personal sadness with national sorrow. This style of writing made her rather different from the majority of other female poets in the late Ming and early Qing, which I will discuss further in the next chapter.

Fang Mengshi

Fang Mengshi (1582-1639) is one of the members of Mingyuan Poetry Club. Mengshi is the oldest sister in the Fang family of Tongcheng. Mengshi married Zhang Bingwen (张秉文, 1585-1639), who also came from an influential family in Tongcheng. Later her husband Zhang became Provincial Administration Commissioner of Shandong province in the Ming government. Mengshi moved from

¹¹⁶ Fang, “The Preface of Collection from the *Studio* of Clear Fragrance,” 40

Tongcheng to Jinan (the capital of Shandong province) with her husband. In the winter of 1638, the Qing troops invaded Jinan city, the capital of Shandong.

Mengshi's husband led the soldiers to resist stubbornly. However, they failed due to an insufficient supply of food and weapons in the city. Zhang Bingwen died for his country and Mengshi committed suicide after her husband's death. Ma Qichang's (1855-1930) *The Biographies of Individuals in Tongcheng City* (*Tongcheng qijiu zhuan*, 桐城耆旧传) recorded the situation at the time:

Lady Fang said to her husband: "The fortune of the country determines if you are alive or not, and you determine mine."Lady Fang said to her servants: "If something happens, push me into the lake!" And then she told her husband's concubine: "I do not want to live alone in this world after our husband dies. However, you should look after the children and return to our hometown." The concubine refused and asked to die together with Mengshi. Therefore, they both jumped into the Daming Lake in Jinan. Mengshi's action moved the servants, who also jumped to death with Mengshi.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Ma, *The Biographies of Individuals in Tongcheng City*, 453. "夫人语公: '夫子之死生惟官守, 妾之死生惟夫子'夫人戒侍婢: '事急, 则推我入湖水中!' 至是, 谓妾陈曰: '吾义不独生, 汝当保持孤幼归故乡耳!' 妾请同死, 颔之, 遂同赴大明湖死。侍婢感而殉者又数人".

Mengshi's poetry anthology *Collection from the Studio of Renlan* is the only poetry collection published by members of Mingyuan Poetry Club that is still extant today. Mengshi's use of different poetic genres is very comprehensive. Both classical poetry (*Gu shi* 古诗) and regulated verse¹¹⁸ (*Jinti shi* 近体诗, literally "modern form poetry") are well written. Although she is a female poet, the content is not limited to the inner quarters. This is due to the influence of her husband's political career in the government. Her husband's nephew Zhang Ying (1637-1708), who later became Grand Secretary of the Qing government, wrote a preface to the *Collection from the Studio of Renlan*. "The ancient poetry and Yuefu poetry written by her has the grace of the Han and Wei dynasties. Her regulated verse could surpass the style since the Tang dynasty, and is washed clean of the delicate and sensitive style of ordinary female poets."¹¹⁹ Since Mengshi had been following her husband as an official in Shandong province, she could not participate in the activities of the Mingyuan Poetry Club. However, she exchanged poetry and creative insights with the

¹¹⁸ Classical poetry (古诗), regulated verse (近体诗) and Yuefu poetry are three categories of Chinese classic poetry. Classical poetry was popular before the Tang dynasty and it did not have the regulated rhythm and verse. Regulated verse, which became popular after the Tang dynasty, is completely distinct from classical poetry, in that the former must have regulated rhythm and line-length. Yuefu Poetry was the poetic form of music ballads.

¹¹⁹ Zhang Ying 张英, "Preface" in *Ren lan ge ji* 纫兰阁集 [Collection from the Studio of Renlan]. Beijing: guojia tushu guan. "其古诗乐府, 沉郁顿挫, 出入汉魏; 五七律绝句, 聿追盛唐, 一洗闺阁柔纤之习".

other members by sending letters, such as “Sent to My Sister” (*Ji mei*, 寄妹). In this poem Mengshi writes, “I want you to stay with me, when can this wandering life stop?” (淹留吾妹在, 何日静风尘), which was used to express the feelings of missing her sister after Weiyi was separated from her.

Other Mingyuan Poetry Club members also recorded how Mengshi contacted them, as seen in the extant poems. For instance, Fang Weiyi mentioned twice in her works that she had received poems and letters from Mengshi, which were “Getting a Poem from My Older Sister” (*De bozi shi xun*, 得伯姊诗讯) and “Getting a Letter from Mrs. Zhang in Late Spring” (*Muchun de zhang furen shu* 暮春得张夫人书). Another poetry club member, Wu Lingyi, left a poem “Sent to My Sister-in-law Mrs Zhang in Three Gorges” (*Sanxia ji bogu zhang furen* 三峡寄伯姑张夫人), which described her travel experience. The last two lines of this poem, “Wanting to know your thoughts and heart, I hope you can draw it and send it to me” (欲将镜里琴中意, 巧画裙拖寄妹) showed the process by which they communicated with each other through sending poems.

Fang Weize

Fang Weize is the cousin of Fang Weiyi and Fang Mengshi. She attended the Mingyuan Poetry Club with her cousins. There are few existing historical facts about Weize's life. She was married to a scholar named Wu Shaozhong (吴绍忠), who died when she was sixteen.¹²⁰ She lived in widowhood for sixty-eight years until she died at the age of eighty-four. Weize had a published poetry collection called *Collection from the Studio of Maosong*.¹²¹ However, her published poetry collection is no longer extant. I traced ten poetic works by Fang Weize in three different later poetry collections.¹²² One of the ten poems, “Emotional Feeling on my Gengwu¹²³ Birthday” (*Gengwu shengri ganhuai*, 庚午生日感怀) provides a rough understanding of her life in the first part:

十四适君子， Married with my husband when I was fourteen,
三岁亡所天。 he died in 3 years.

¹²⁰ Fang Weize wrote in her poem analyzed in next few lines of this paragraph, “Married with my husband when I was fourteen, he died in three years”(十四适君子， 三岁亡所天), which suggests that Weize lost her husband at seventeen. However, other records such as “The Grace of Longmian” by Pan Jiang, “Classics of Poetry by Famous Women” by Wang Duanshu, and “Notes of Poetry in Jingzhi House” by Zhu Yizun all indicate that Weize lived in widowhood since sixteen. In this way, Weize's poem should be understood as her husband's death happened in the third year of their marriage, not after three years of the marriage.

¹²¹ Xu Ao 徐璈, *Tong jiu ji* 桐旧集 [The Poetry Collection of Tongcheng City]. (Beijing: Beijing shi fan da xue chu ban she, 2016), 294.

¹²² The three later poetry collections are: *Collection of Banned and Destroyed Books from the Complete Library of the Four Branches* 四库禁毁书丛刊 *Si Ku Jin Hui Shu Cong Kan* (1997). Pan Jiang 潘江. *Long Mian Feng Ya* 龙眠风雅 [The Grace of Longmian]. (Beijing: Guo jia tu shu guan), 188.; Xu Ao 徐璈, *Tong jiu ji* 桐旧集 [The Poetry Collection of Tongcheng City] (Beijing: Beijing shi fan da xue chu ban she, 2016), 295-296; Fu, *Record of Anhui's female writing in the Ming and Qing dynasty*, 127-129.

¹²³ Gengwu is a name of year in traditionally Chinese calendar, here it may refer the year 1690 B.C.E.

一身事孀姑， I took care of my mother-in-law,

于今四十年。 forty years already.

始意填沟壑， I wanted to die,

有孤存目前。 but I didn't want my child to be an orphan.

不幸襁褓儿， Unfortunately, the baby wrapped in vines,

又复归黄泉。 he died after his father.

此时肠欲断， I was extremely sad at that time,

苟生安可全。 I can only keep alive without ambition.

From Weize's narrative, it was apparent how fate had mistreated her. Besides, Fang Weiyi also mentioned in her poetry that Weize lost her parents in childhood.¹²⁴ Weize might have been assisted by Mengshi and Weiyi's parents and they may have received their family education together.

The intimate connection among these three sisters is revealed through the naming process of their studios. According to their published poetry collection, Mengshi gave her reading name as "*Renlan*" (纫兰). The original meaning of this

¹²⁴ In "Thoughts of Mrs. Maosong at the Yangtze River," Fang Weiyi writes: "I remember that you lost your parents from a young age, and lived a hard lifetime with sorting out the housework" (记从年少失双亲，操作辛勤到骨贫).

word in classic Chinese was to string orchid vines together to form a girdle or rope, which originated from Qu Yuan's (屈原, 343 B.C.-278 B.C.) poem "Encountering Sorrow" (*Li sao*, 离骚).¹²⁵ The word "*Renlan*" was popularized after Qu Yuan's work and was used to refer to individuals with moral integrity. Weiyi's studio was named "*Qingfen*" (清芬), which initially meant clear water and fragrant plants. It referred to noble virtue according to Lu Ji's (陆机, 261-303) prose "Rhapsody on Literature" (*Wenfu*, 文赋).¹²⁶ Weize's studio was called "*Maosong*" (茂松), which meant the dense pine tree. It was often used in poetry to describe people of firm character. Therefore, in the naming of their studio, all three of them chose words related to plants representing moral virtues, which illustrates the shared consistency of their thoughts.

The poem "Emotional Feeling on my Gengwu Birthday" clearly illustrates the similar experiences shared by Fang Weize and Fang Weiyi. Both of them lost their

¹²⁵ Fallen into Sorrow by Qu Yuan was the longest lyric poetry in ancient China. The name of Mengshi's studio "*Renlan*" came from the verse "I gathered and wore the angelicas of the streams, and those of the hidden vales; I strung together the autumn orchids to wear at my girdle" (扈江离与辟芷兮，纫秋兰以为佩). Here the translation was referenced from Dr. James Legge's journal article, "The Li Sao Poem and Its Author."

¹²⁶ It came from Lu Ji's prose "咏世德之骏烈，诵先人之清芬" (He sings of the great achievements attained by generations of virtue, And claims on the pure fragrance of his forebears). Tong Xiao and David R. Knechtges, *Wen Xuan, or, Selections of Refined Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 211-232.

husbands and children one after another in a short period of time and they endured tremendous pain caused by their unfortunate fate. Weize and her cousin Weiyi had a close relationship revealed in their extant poems. It might be that similar life experiences made them understand each other's feelings better and comfort each other better. For example, Fang Weiyi twice mentions their similar experiences in her poems "Thoughts of Mrs. Maosong at the Yangtze River" (*Chujiang huan wumei maosong ge si shou* 楚江怀吴妹茂松阁四首), "who can be similar to me like you in such a sad life?" (苦节一生谁得似) and "the unfortunate fate made us suffer the loss of relatives together" (薄命同罹骨肉哀). Similarly, in a poem written on Weize's overnight stay with Weiyi, titled "Spending the Night with My Sister in the Studio of Clear Fragrance" (*Su zi yao qingfen ge* 宿姊姚清芬阁), the last two lines in this poem state, "the two of us can rely on each other until our hair turns grey, and then the classic studies can be naturally learned" (相依能白首, 古学自然成). The previous line indicates that these two cousins were willing to accompany each other until they grew old, reflecting their deep and close relationship. The latter line indicates that they not only share their life and feelings but they also share their learning; the classic

studies mentioned here is mainly in reference to the study of classic literature and classic Chinese characters and is closely related to the family learning of Fang clan which was discussed earlier.

Among the existing poetic works of Weiyi, there are six poems that express her nostalgia for her cousin Weize including “Recalling My Cousin Mrs. Maosong¹²⁷ on a Cold Month (*Hanyue yi mei maosong ge* 寒月忆妹茂松阁), “Parted with Sister Wu in Late Spring” (*Muchun yu wumei huabie* 暮春与吴妹话别), and “Thoughts of Mrs. Maosong at the Yangtze River” (*Chujiang huan wumei maosong ge si shou* 楚江怀吴妹茂松阁四首). Of the poems Weiyi wrote and dedicated to others, the greatest number were dedicated to Weize. This illustrates the close relationship between the two women.

Because the three sisters showed loyalty to the dynasty and their husbands, the provincial governor, Fang Kongzhao (Weiyi and Mengshi’s younger brother and Weize’s cousin) wrote a memorial asking that they receive imperial recognition for their chastity from the Ming emperor in 1644 (the *Jiashen* year of the Chongzhen

¹²⁷ Here Fang Weiyi uses the name of Weize’s studio to refer to her cousin.

Emperor 崇禎帝, also the last year of the Ming dynasty). Therefore, later generations referred to these three sisters as the "Three Chaste Fang Family Women."¹²⁸

Wu Lingyi

Wu Lingyi was the sister-in-law of Fang Weiyi and Fang Mengshi. She published a poetry collection titled *Posthumous Collection from the Chamber of Fupei* (*Fupei ju yu ji*, 黻佩居遺集), collected by Fang Weiyi after Lingyi's death.¹²⁹

Unfortunately, this published work no longer exists. Lingyi's father, Wu Yingbin, was a famous academic official of the Ming government.¹³⁰ She received a full education from her father since childhood. Later she married Fang Kongzhao, the youngest son in the Fang family. Lingyi had an excellent talent for writing poetry. The famous Qing dynasty female scholar and anthologist of women's poetry, Wang Duanshu (王端淑, 1621-1701), commented on Lingyi's poetic works: "Mrs. Fang (Lingyi)'s talent for poetry is outstanding, just like a crane standing in the chicken flock or a

¹²⁸ *Kangxi Tongcheng Xian Zhi* 康熙桐城县志 [Tongcheng County Gazetteer Kangxi edition], as quoted in Sturgeon (2011). Locations of the textual references given in this paper can also be determined using the Chinese Text Project website: <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=116931&page=9&remap=gb>

¹²⁹ Pan, *The Grace of Longmian*.

¹³⁰ In Fang Mengshi's "Preface of Dirge Poetry to Wu Yiren" 挽吳宜人詩序 (Yiren, the other name of Wu Lingyi), she mentions Lingyi as being the second daughter of "Tai Shi Gong" (吳宜人, 太史公仲女). From Hucker's "A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China", the title "Tai Shi Gong" was a title in the Han dynasty. In the Ming and Qing dynasty, there was a similar title, "Tai Shi Ling" 太史令, which was an unofficial reference both to a Chancellor in the Hanlin Academy and a Director of the Directorate of Astronomy.

pine tree in the wood.”¹³¹ Wang’s massive work *Classics of Poetry by Famous Women* (*Mingyuan shiwei*, 名媛诗纬) represented over one thousand authors and included over two thousand poems. She carefully studied and selected the entries of each poet based on extensive research. Wang wrote a brief biography for every female poet in the collection and included commentary on their poems. Wang compiled this poetry collection in order to preserve and spread the outstanding poetic works by female poets. Her work preserved the feminine writing tradition for later generations.¹³²

Lingyi’s sister-in-law, Fang Mengshi, also noted Lingyi’s proficiency in poetry, calligraphy, music, drawing, embroidery, and brewing. Lingyi admired Fang Weiyi as her poetry teacher. Before she died at the young age of thirty, Lingyi requested that Weiyi take care of her sons and daughters after her death.¹³³ Fang Weiyi said in her *Widow’s Narrative*: "My younger brother's wife died at an early

¹³¹ Wang Duanshu 王端淑. *Ming yuan shi wei chu bian* 名媛诗纬初编 [Classics of Poetry by Famous Women First Edition], 10.10a. <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/search/results-work.php?workID=120&l>. “方夫人诗高老如鸡群之鹤，木群之松”.

¹³² Fong & Widmer, “Retrieving the past: women editors and women’s poetry, 1636-1941” 86-87.

¹³³ Ma, *The Biographies of Individuals in Tongcheng City*.

age. I will raise her children and teach them until they get married. At that time, I will have fulfilled my promise to her.”¹³⁴

Most of her existing poems were written to other poetry club members. For example, the poem Lingyi wrote to Fang Weiyi, “To My Sister-in-law Weiyi” (*Cheng yao weiyi guzi* 呈姚维仪姑姊) records the close relationship between them. And the poem “Sent to My Sister-in-law Mrs. Zhang in the Three Gorges” (*Sanxia ji bogu zhang furen* 三峡寄伯姑张夫人) mentions how Lingyi communicated with other members through letters. “Respectful Companion Piece to My Sister-in-law Mrs. Zhang’s Poem to her Honored Son-in-law” (*Fenghe bogu zhang furen ru yao zeng xu* 奉和伯姑张夫人如耀赠婿) was a companion piece to Mengshi’s poem. The poem called “Recalling My Sister Mrs. He on the Road to Ciman Pavilion” (*Ci man ting daozhong you huai heshi nv xiong* 次曼亭道中有怀何氏女兄), showed a close relationship with her sister Wu Lingze. All of these poems will be analyzed in the next chapter.

Wu Lingze

¹³⁴ Ma, *The Biographies of Individuals in Tongcheng City*, 456.

Wu Lingze is the elder sister of Wu Lingyi from the Wu family. There are only a few words about her in historical references. The poetry collection *The Grace of Longmian*¹³⁵ provides a brief and straightforward introduction to Wu Lingze. She was the eldest sister in the Wu family and married He Yingqiong. Lingze was good at Chinese classics and history and she learned how to write poetry in childhood from her father. Lingze usually accompanied her husband when he was reading and writing. She looked for many concubines for her husband because she was not able to give birth to a son. Lingze published her poetry anthology *The Collection from the Hall of Huanzhu* (*Huanzhushi ji*, 环珠室集) to show her ambitions.¹³⁶ However, as in the case of her sister Lingyi, the published collection is no longer extant. Wang Duanshu also mentioned that Lingze often wrote poems to express her feelings when she saw beautiful scenery, however, she burned many of her poetic works. The handed down poems were mainly collected by her female relatives.¹³⁷ Unlike other female poetry club members, there were no poems written for other poetry club members in Lingze's poetic works. This could be due to the limited number of her

¹³⁵ Pan, *The Grace of Longmian*, 111.

¹³⁶ Pan, *The Grace of Longmian*, 111.

¹³⁷ Wang, *Classics of Poetry by Famous Women First Edition*, 10.10a.

existing poems, most of which are addressed to her husband He Yingqiong. Her husband's other name was Yuzhi (玉之) and he came from an official family, as Lingze's father-in-law once held the position of head of the Provincial Administration Commission in Zhejiang province. Yuzhi was also famous for writing and died at fifty-seven years old. The poems that Lingze wrote to her husband include "Sunlight Cast Back, the First Day Yuzhi Came Back" (*Fanzhao, Yuzhi chu gui ri* 返照, 玉之初归日), "To My Cherished Person" (*Zhangzhu yin* 掌珠吟), "Recalling Yuzhi" (*Yi Yuzhi* 忆玉之), and "Sent to Yuzhi Again" (*Zai ji Yuzhi* 再寄玉之).

Notably, the naming of Lingze's poetry collection is reminiscent of the way that the Fang sisters named their studios. As mentioned before, the published work of Lingyi was *Posthumous Collection from the Chamber of Fupei*. Here *Fupei*'s direct meaning refers to clothes accessorized with jewelry. Lingze's published work was *Collection from the Hall of Huanzhu*, and here *Huanzhu* means beaded jewelries attached to clothes. The names of studios here were used to refer to the gentry class. Only this class of people could use jewelry and accessories on their clothes during

imperial China. The Wu sisters may have used the studio names to show their gentry identity and higher level of education.

The Mingyuan Poetry Club, as one of the earliest female poetry clubs during the late Ming and the early Qing dynasties, demonstrates the significant influence of family on the formation of kinship-based poetry clubs. The local values and cultural atmosphere influenced the creation of localized family values. Therefore, the family values of influential families affected the lives and literary creations of the female poetry club members. Most members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club came from the Fang family, which was one of the most influential families in Tongcheng. The influence of the Fang clan developed as they became the government officials by gaining fame in the imperial examinations. And the eleventh-generation family member named Fang Xuejian finally created a system of family learning, which had a continual influence on every family member.

The other two members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club came from another influential family in Tongcheng, the Wu family. The Wu family shared a similar family learning with the Fang family. These two influential families became

connected through matched marriage, which was conventional in Tongcheng.

Marriage had the most direct impact on gentry women's lives, especially on members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club. It was a source of misery for some members, and also the source of inspiration for their literary works. Five members from the two families linked by marriage and kinship formed one of the earliest female kinship-based poetry clubs. The volume of poetic works they created demonstrates how family and kinship affected them and the development of their poetry club. The next chapter will give more analysis on their existing poetic works.

Chapter 5 The Analysis of Poetic Works from the Mingyuan

Poetry Club

The five members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club had similar educational backgrounds gained through their family learning. They shared life experiences and engaged with each other through the activities of their poetry club. Furthermore, several members lived together in the same household. For instance, Fang Mengshi and Fang Weiyi were sisters; Wu Lingyi and Wu Lingze were also sisters; and, Fang Weiyi and her sister-in-law Wu Lingyi lived together after Lingyi's husband moved away for work. The close family ties between these poetry club members are focused upon in their literary creations. There are thematic similarities among the surviving works of the members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club. The topics of their work mostly

relates to their family life and the influence of their family on their emotional experiences. I roughly divide their poetic themes into four categories: forms of grief, love, politics, and companion pieces among poetry club members. In this chapter, I have done my best to represent every member's works in each of the thematic categories. Unfortunately, many works are no longer in existence and it is not possible to include examples from each of the members in each of the categories. The poetic works of the Mingyuan Poetry Club members in this chapter are mostly selected from *A Study of Anhui Women's Literature Works in the Ming and Qing Dynasties* and *The Grace of Longmian*. Because there has been little research done on the Mingyuan Poetry Club and the Fang sisters, most of their poetic works have yet to be translated into English. Among the Mingyuan Poetry Club members, only several of Fang Weiyi's works have English translations which appear in *Women Writers of Traditional China* edited by Kang-I Sun Chang and Haun Saussy.

All other works included in this thesis have been translated by me. It should be mentioned that this chapter of the thesis is mainly to discuss the relationship between gentry women poets' works and family elements in the Mingyuan Poetry Club.

Therefore, the English translations in this chapter do not emphasize literary aspects such as poetic rhyme or rhythm. I translated, as much as possible, the specific content expressed by the poet in the poems. Of the Mingyuan Poetry Club, Fang Weiyi and Fang Mengshi have the greatest number of poems that remain available to us. In this chapter, most of the translated works written by Fang Weiyi and Fang Mengshi are works that have been previously selected for incorporation in the various poetry anthologies mentioned above. In my opinion, these particular poems should receive greater recognition from scholars for their literary value as representative works of these early female gentry poets. For the remaining members of the group, the number of their poetic works that remain in existence is limited and, where possible, I will translate as much of their work available to us as I can.

Theme of Love

In poetic criticism of the time, it was standard to describe women's poetry as being both more delicate in style and emotional in theme than their male counterparts.¹³⁸ Therefore, love-themed poetry is inevitable in the works of female

¹³⁸ Wang Liyu 王郦玉, "Ming Qing nvxing de wenxue jianjie" 明清女性的文学见解 [The literary opinions of women in the Ming and Qing dynasties], *Ming Qing nvxing de wenxue piping* 明清女性的文学批评 [The Literature criticism by Women in the Ming and Qing dynasties], 88.

poets and it is generally understood that women poets were more likely than men to use poetry as a carrier to express their feelings. In addition, the cult of *qing* (情) had begun to gain in popularity around the mid-Ming dynasty. Here *qing* indicates “feelings”, “love”, “romantic sentiments”, and “passions.”¹³⁹ At that time, Ming scholars, affected by the spread of the School of Mind, launched an argument between *qing* and *xing* (性, human’s inborn nature). The scholars believed that *qing* should be more valued than *xing* by individuals. The cult of *qing* was considered the important and positive element in writing and reading poems for late Ming writers.¹⁴⁰ The element of *qing* appeared in a large number of literary works during the late Ming and early Qing dynasty. Not only male writers, but also female poets of the Mingyuan Poetry Club were inevitably influenced by this trend.

During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, although gentry women’s literary space was expanding, their physical movement remained confined. This is why most of the early female poetry clubs were established among family members.

¹³⁹ Martin W. Huang, “Sentiments of Desire: Thoughts on the Cult of Qing in Ming-Qing Literature,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 20 (1998), 153. <https://doi.org/10.2307/495268>.

¹⁴⁰ Huang, “Sentiments of Desire: Thoughts on the Cult of Qing in Ming-Qing Literature,” 160.

For these gentry women, the only chance to experience love occurred after marrying their husbands. Whereas, the male poets could write love-themed poems to both their wives and courtesans, female gentry poets were only permitted to express love for their husbands. This explains why, for the Fang sisters, all of their love-themed poetry has their husbands as the focus of their affections. In these works, they either express their love for their husband that is living by their side, or for their husband who has traveled far away, or for their husband who has died an early death. The next paragraphs analyze selected poems written by poetry club members that include the theme of love as expressed through the state of missing their husband.

Wives of Ming officials, such as Fang Mengshi and Wu Lingyi, often faced periods of separation from their husbands. When one's husband worked in another city or province, a gentry wife may not have always been able to follow him. Sometimes a wife needed to stay home to raise their children and take care of their parents-in-law. Wives often experienced sadness when they were separated from their husbands and expressed this kind of emotion in their poetry. For example:

舟发江陵潜夫卿将自襄阳入计赠别 吴令仪

A Farewell to My Husband who took a Boat from Jiangling,¹⁴¹ Setting off from
 Xiangyang¹⁴² on His Way to the Capital to Report for Work. By Wu Lingyi

去年西蜀两游人， We traveled to the western province of Sichuan last year,
 春入江流花正新。 the spring flows into the river, and the flowers just opened.

今日与君分燕婉¹⁴³， Today I will part from you with our conjugal love, sir,
 却从归路泪沾巾。 the tears wet the handkerchief on returning.

寒风峭急雨声长， The cold wind blew through the steep peaks, the sound of rain
 endless.

珠泪千垂不尽行。 Pearl-like tears fall without cease.

莫恨石尤江泊夜， Don't want to hate this night of parting,
 只愁容易到襄阳。 Just worry that Xiangyang city is so easy to reach.

This poem was written when Wu Lingyi saw her husband Fang Kongzhao
 off on his journey to the capital to report for work, It expresses her resentment at
 being left behind. From the first line of the poem, it is evident that this couple had
 experience traveling together in the past. In their leisure time, it appears that they

¹⁴¹ Jiangling, the old name of Jingzhou city, which is in the middle of Hubei province.

¹⁴² Xiangyang, the city in the northwest of Hubei province.

¹⁴³ 燕婉, "yan wan" means the conjugal love between husband and wife.

enjoyed a close relationship. The first line emphasizes that they traveled together, while the second line stresses that she will be left alone when her husband goes away. It shows that Fang Kongzhao, as a husband, did not restrict his wife from travelling outside the home.

As mentioned before, in the late Ming dynasty, gentry men also wanted their wives to have a high level of cultural literacy. As educated gentry women, they would be able to have more in common with their husbands after marriage. Thus, companionate marriage relationships began to take shape in this period. For example, Fang Mengshi, a Mingyuan Poetry Club member, composed a companion poem with her husband, which remains available to us to this day:

和夫黄鹤作¹⁴⁴ A Companion Piece to My Husband's Poem of Yellow Crane Tower

晴川远树白云浮， The white clouds floated on the sunny river and trees in the distance,

闻道遨游黄鹤楼。 I heard that you went to Yellow Crane Tower.

鹦鹉洲前分二水， The river divided in two in front of Parrot Island,

¹⁴⁴ Wang, *Classics of Poetry by Famous Women First Edition*, 10.5b.

汉阳城外泊孤舟。 the solitary boat moored outside Hanyang city¹⁴⁵.

萋萋草色春闺怨， The grass grows lushly, the young woman repining in her
boudoir.

活活江声夜客愁。 The travelers feel depressed due to the sound of the river flowing.

倦幔踌躇看不见， The weary curtain of the stationary boat does not see,

空怜新月曲如钩。 the weak crescent moon can only hang in the sky like a hook.

In the Ming Dynasty, public society strongly promoted women's chastity.

After the death of a gentry woman's husband, maintaining chastity as a widow was

regarded as an essential life credo by both the women themselves and society in

general. Fang's family learning was relatively open and the relaxed family

environment allowed poetry club members to show their literary talents but the

concepts of women's virtue and etiquette taught from childhood still restrained their

self-awareness in their poetry and in their lives.

In the Mingyuan Poetry Club, three of its five members received the

government's commendation for maintaining their chastity. Fang Mengshi was

¹⁴⁵ Hanyang is now one of the districts of Wuhan city in Hubei province.

praised for committing suicide after her husband's death and both Fang Weiyi and Fang Weize remained single for the majority of their lives after the deaths of their husbands at very young ages. These three women were known as the "Three Chaste Fang Family Women." Weiyi's poem "Imploring to be Buried Together" written in her later years expresses how much she misses her prematurely dead husband and reinforces her insistence on remaining chaste:

求合墓诗 Imploring to be Buried Together

自别君后苦伤情， I have suffered such bitter sadness since you left me,

六十余年独守贞。 and I have been guarding my chastity for more than sixty years.

兰蕙¹⁴⁶由来多损折， There are many upright men who have died early since ancient times,

松筠¹⁴⁷差不愧平生。 but the strength of character was already worthy of your whole life.

当初显梦寻长忆， I often recall the dream of you,

¹⁴⁶ The original meaning of "兰蕙, lanhui" is perfumed plants, which used to refer to upright men in Chinese classical poetry.

¹⁴⁷ The original meanings of "松筠, songyun" are pine and bamboo, which used to refer to the strength of character in Chinese classical poetry.

今日迁坟敢背盟。 I dare not betray our oath when your grave was moved by your family today.

薄命若成同穴愿， If I can fulfill my wish to be buried together with you,

挽歌无复断肠声。 the dirge will no longer be a sad song.

This poem by Fang Weiyi is also lamenting the death of her husband.

According to statistics, there were very few poems on mourning written by female

poets before the end of the Ming dynasty.¹⁴⁸ As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the

cult of *qing* became popular for gentry female in the late Ming period. This influenced

the increase in number of poems lamenting death written by gentry women poets.

These gentry women came from upper-class families so they could not express their

loyalty to their husband by crying and performing in public like lower-class women.

Therefore, writing poems became a way for these gentry women to give voice to their

sadness and to demonstrate their determination to remain chaste in commemoration of

their dead husbands.

¹⁴⁸ Fong, Widmer and McLaren, "Lamenting the Dead: Women's performance of grief in late imperial China," 49.

Among all the members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club, Wu Lingze has the most poems on the theme of love to remain in existence. Wu Lingze has seven poems, four out of seven of which were written to her husband He Yuzhi. The four poems written by Lingze include “To My Cherished Person” (*Zhang zhu yin* 掌珠吟), “Sunlight Cast Back, the First Day Yuzhi Came Back” (*Fan zhao: Yuzhi chu gui ri*, 返照: 玉之初归日), Recalling Yuzhi (*Yi Yuzhi*, 忆玉之), and “Sent to Yuzhi Again” (*Zai ji Yuzhi*, 再寄玉之). Unlike the husbands of Fang Mengshi and Wu Lingyi, Lingze’s husband did not choose to be an official. Therefore, he could spend more time with his wife. Furthermore, He Yuzhi did not die as early as the husbands of Fang Weiyi and Fang Weize. According to the historical record, Lingze’s husband died at the age of fifty-seven.¹⁴⁹ Lingze and her husband must have had a deep relationship during their marriage. Below is my translation of Lingze’s poem titled “Recalling Yuzhi”, in which Lingze uses numerous sad elements to express her feelings about their temporary parting:

忆玉之 Recalling Yuzhi¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Fu, *Record of Anhui’s female writing in the Ming and Qing dynasty*, 198.

¹⁵⁰ Yuzhi, another name of Wu Lingze’s husband.

春来草色想河关， The green grass misses the river pass when spring comes,

远道绵绵不可攀。 but the continuous road is exceptionally far away.

翻恨白云飞去疾， I hated why the white clouds flew away so fast instead,

夕阳千里露桐山。 Mt. Tong is thousands of miles away from me at sunset.

Combining the emotional tone perceived as standard in women's poetry and the influence of the cult of *qing* in that period, the theme of love poems played an important role in gentry women's poetic works. In the Mingyuan Poetry Club, the members were influenced by both the cult of *qing* and the School of Principle and Reason. They choose to write poems to express their love for their husbands. However, they expressed their love in indirect ways. Judging from the poetry club member's poems analyzed in the previous paragraphs, most of them express their love for husbands through the sensation of separation. The separation could be both as a result of a temporary parting or a permanent parting in death. And, even if the female poets in the Mingyuan Poetry Club express their feelings of missing their husbands in times of separation, they prefer to use the standard literary tropes and descriptions of natural scenes to reflect their love and sadness rather than straightforward expressions

of longing in their poems. Due to the special life experiences of members in the Mingyuan Poetry Club, some of them became widows in their early age, and some of the members' husband worked as officials in other provinces. Therefore, the love-themed poems that they wrote to their husbands were mostly related to parting, mourning, and longing. The love-themed poems inevitably reveal feelings of grief, a feeling which overlaps with other forms of grief which appear as themes within their poetry. In order to make a distinction between these two themes of love-related grief and other forms of grief, the poems under the theme of love are all works that clearly portray their husbands as the focus of their emotions. The poems that focus of other forms of grief will be analyzed under the theme of forms of grief below.

Theme of Forms of Grief

Due to the restrictions on their living environment and rules concerning the protection of their virtue, most gentry women had to rely on their male relatives. Gentry women like those members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club had no control over their destiny in the late Ming and early Qing era. Coupled with such fates as becoming a widow at a young age, their painful thoughts are full of melancholy.

These emotions are naturally expressed in their poetic works. Some of these women grieve the passing of time, such as in Fang Mengshi's "Recalling the Past" (*Yi jiu*, 忆旧), Wu Lingze's "Healed from Illness in Spring" (*Chunri bing qi*, 春日病起), Fang Weiyi's "Writing in Illness" (*Bing zhong zuo*, 病中作) and Wu Lingyi's "Expressing My Cares" (*Qian huai*, 遣怀):

忆旧 Recalling the Past By Fang Mengshi

一别江潭月几圆，

The moon has waxed and waned since the last separation on the waterfront,

相怜人面不如前。

The faces are not as young as before.

依稀旧日芳菲在，

It seems the beautiful flower in the past was still there,

秋雨梧桐十二年。

The sycamore tree hit by the autumn rain has been standing there for twelve years.

春日病起 Healed from Illness in Spring By Wu Lingze

闲门春色晓悠悠，

The spring scenery in front of the door is filled with melancholy,

绿柳红梅不解愁。

And the green willow and red plum blossom could not relieve my sadness.

何事离人经眼去，

Seeing the people around me leave the world,

一回攀折便成秋。

It is like breaking the branches, and the spring suddenly changing to autumn.

Grace Fong notes that women in the Ming and Qing dynasties turned illness into a common topic in their poetic works and the poetry linked with illness was developed as a writing mode by female poets in this period.¹⁵¹ For female poets in the Ming and Qing period, illness acted as a tool for them to express their grief. They transformed their experience of illness into a creative space to reflect on their spiritual existence. The members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club followed this kind of writing mode. For example, Lingze's poem "Healed from Illness in Spring" (above) describes a scene in springtime when the poet has just recovered from an illness. It should be a

¹⁵¹ Fong, "Writing and illness: a feminine condition in women's poetry of the Ming and Qing," 19.

happy thing to be healed in the spring when everything in is a process of rebirth and renewal, however, Lingze writes that the green willow and red plum blossom could not relieve her sadness, and she feels sorrow at the departure of her relatives.

Generally, the poem expresses great sadness and sorrow and, except for the word “illness” present in the title, there is no mention of any disease-related words or phrases in this poem. Instead, she used words like “sadness” to express her feelings.

Fang Weiyi also wrote four poems on the topic of illness titled “Writing in Illness”.

One of the poems is as follows:

病中作 Writing in Illness By Fang Weiyi

生来薄命老无依， My life is unfortunate, and I have nothing to rely on when I grow old,

风雨萧萧独掩扉。 Only the sound of wind and rain block the door.

病里流年将发变， The passing year of illness will change my hair color,

堂前设席见人稀。 And few people come to visit me even though I prepare a banquet in the main hall.

双亲拭泪怜孤女， My parents wiped tears and pitied their lonely daughter,

一弟携医问素帏。 One of my younger brothers brought a doctor to see me.

长夜钟声清露冷， The long night bell sounded with the cold rain,

子规枝上起唏嘘。 The cuckoo sighed on the branch.

It is obvious from Weiyi's poem that these gentry women poets were silent about the specific conditions of their illness. Unlike Lingze's illness-related poem, Weiyi does mention the word "illness" directly in the text but she does not describe her symptoms or name the malady from which she suffers. This poem only mentions the fact that she was ill.

The illness poems as a poetic convention were also found in male writers' works. However, unlike male poets who directly describe their illnesses by name and symptoms, these female poets did not want to talk about their specific conditions, instead choosing only to mention their illness as a means to record their subjective feeling about life.¹⁵² They used illness as a metaphor to express their sorrow and grief over their tragic fate.

遣怀 Expressing My Cares By Wu Lingyi

¹⁵² Fong, "Writing and illness: a feminine condition in women's poetry of the Ming and Qing," 20.

几树孤村外， There are several trees outside the isolated village,

空船倚暮云。 the empty ship against the evening clouds.

风来衰草色， The wind blows down the color of grass,

日去荡潮纹。 and the sea was undulating after the sunset.

群雁江边语， A group of wild geese whispered on the waterfront,

凄猿雨后闻。 and the mournful cry by the apes after rain can be heard.

无端钩月小， The moon for no reason becomes the crescent size,

人影各单分。 and people and their shadow separate.

There are two characteristic features shared by the Mingyuan Poetry Club that are worth noting in analyzing these three poems. First, they express their inner hesitation and loneliness by describing lonely natural scenes. The moon, trees and flowers were their favorite symbols. Secondly, some verses in these poems do not reflect the poet's thoughts directly, but readers feel their sadness and loneliness descriptive imagery. For example, in the poems "Healed in Spring" and "Recalling the Past", Mengshi and Lingze use the changing of the seasons to give expression to their regret at the passing of time. Moreover, in the last verse of Lingyi's "Expressing

My Concerns”, she does not show her emotion of loneliness directly, instead she uses the image of a person separated from their shadow to evoke the emotion.

Another take on the theme of grief written about by the Mingyuan Poetry Club members is to give straightforward expression to the feeling. For example, Fang Weiyi’s “The Pain of Grief” (*Shang huai*, 伤怀) and Fang Weize’s “Emotional Feeling on my Gengwu Birthday” (*Gengwu shengri ganhuai*, 庚午生日感怀):

伤怀 The Pain of Grief By Fang Weiyi

长年依父母，苦怀多感伤。

Relying on my parents for years, sad emotions fill me with grief.

奄忽发将变，空室独彷徨。

The death around me suddenly occurred, I pace back and forth listlessly in an empty room.

此生何蹇劣，事事安可详。

The fate of my life is unsuccessful. How can everything in the world be understandable?

十七丧其夫，十八孤女殇。

I lost my husband when I was seventeen, and my only daughter left me when I was

eighteen.

旧居在东郭，新柳暗河梁。

When I previously lived on the east side of the town, early spring willow trees
sheltered the bridge of the river.

萧条下霜雪，台阁起荒凉。

The trees and grass faded under the snow, and the pavilions were desolate.

人世何不齐，天命何不常。

Why is the path of life so difficult, and why is there no rule for destiny?

鹧鸪栖一枝，鲲鹏抟风翔。

The wren stands on a branch, the roc flies in a whirlwind.

焉能忘故地，终朝泣断肠。

How can I forget the past? I cry all day long.

孤身当自慰，乌用叹存亡。

I can only comfort myself, because the lament for life and death has no effect.

The poem by Weiyi was written after many years of widowhood, having lost her
husband and child at an early age. After leaving her husband's family, for a long time

she could only rely on her parents. As mentioned in the previous chapter of the thesis, it was unusual for a widow to return to her natal family. Therefore, Weiyi specifically mentions this in the first line of the poem as a means of expressing her tragic fate. In this poem, in addition to directly expressing her own pain, she uses sad toned words like “fade” and “desolate” to set off her sorrow and sadness. Weiyi even asks the heavens why they have given her such an unfair destiny. However, in the end, she can only say that there is no point in lamenting life and death because it has no effect on her tragic destiny. The last line of the poem is a negation of the previous lines of the poem, but it is such a negative expression that embodies Weiyi’s extreme pain and helplessness. Although her fate could not, in reality, be changed, the poet treats her poem as a way for her to comfort herself.

庚午生日感怀 Emotional Feeling on my Gengwu Birthday By Fang Weize

十四适君子，三岁亡所天。

Married with my husband when I was fourteen, he died in three years.

一身事孀姑，于今四十年。

I took care of my mother-in-law, it has been forty years.

始意填沟壑¹⁵³，有孤存目前。

I wanted to die, but I did not want my child to be an orphan.

不幸襁褓儿，又复归黄泉。

Unfortunately, the baby wrapped in vines, he died after his father.

此时肠欲断，苟生安可全。

I was heartbroken at that time, I can only keep alive without ambition.

抱志松筠洁，铭心金石坚。

I decided to have moral integrity like the pine and bamboo, never forget the firmness
like gold and stone.

神明或默佑，他人岂见怜。

The Gods may bless me silently, how can other people pity me?

东溪桃李郁芊芊，西山孤墓含苍烟。

The flourishing peach and plum trees grow along the east stream, a lonely grave on the
west hill with the pale clouds.

古来圣贤俱已矣，唯有清风万古传。

The past sages have passed away, but their morality passed on from generation to

¹⁵³ The original meaning of “沟壑, gouhe” is mountain gully, which used to refer to a deathplace in Chinese classical poetry.

generation.

In these two works, Weiyi and Weize thoroughly analyze their life experiences, emotions, and ambitions for their audience; this sentiment is entirely different from the previous three poems. They use a similar format to briefly describe their past life and their current situation but there is a noticeable difference between these and the more standardized poems on the theme of grief written by women of the inner chambers. There is a self-consciousness that has begun to form in their work and these female poets pay closer attention to the impermanence of life and the desolate fate that surrounds them. For example, Weiyi's "The Pain of Grief" directly questions the heavens about life and destiny. Furthermore, in Weizi's "Emotional Feeling on my Gengwu Birthday," she compares herself with the ancient sages in the last two lines of this poem. These sentiments are rarely found in poetry written by earlier female poets.

Political Themes

In contrast with the female poets of the previous dynasty, many members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club created poems with political themes. The era they lived in

was turbulent and erratic. Frequent wars occurred during the late Ming period and the dynasty changed during their lifetimes. Many male relatives of the Mingyuan Poetry Club members served in the Ming court. For example, Fang Mengshi's husband was the military governor of Shandong province. Mengshi always followed her husband and eventually they died together in loyalty to the Ming. Lingyi's husband, as well as Mengshi and Weiyi's brother, also became a provincial official at the Ming court.

With such connections and loyalties, it is not surprising that political themes entered into the poetry of club members. In some of their work, this theme is viewed from the unique perspective of a woman, such as Fang Mengshi in her poem, "Concerns For a Husband Going Off to Battle by Chariot" (*Si mu fu zi xing yi zhi si ye* 四牧夫子行役志思也):

四牧夫子行役志思也 Concerns For a Husband Going Off to Battle by Chariot

翩翩者雛，肅肅其羽。

Beautiful pigeons fluttered at a distance, fanning the wings to make a sound.

王事靡盬，以風以雨。

Incomplete, the mission for the emperor; wind and rain for constant companions.

琴瑟在右，我心悲苦。

The musical instruments are next to me, I still feel sad.

檀车幝幝，悲风四起。

The military vehicle seems broken, the severe wind blew everywhere.

父母既远，维予与子。

Parents are far away, only you and me.

相隔千里，共饮江水。

Although thousands of miles apart, we can drink the water from the same river.

In this poem, Mengshi imitates the style of “Concerns For a Husband Going Off to Battle by Chariot” (*Si mu* 四牡) from the Book of Songs.¹⁵⁴ The original verse in the Book of Songs is a poem written by a minor official who is driving a four-horse chariot on a long journey to fight. The poem expresses how he misses his hometown and his parents. Mengshi uses the format of this poem to write a poem about a wife who sends her husband off to fight. She uses the archaic four-character line tradition of the *Shijing* (诗经) which is a stylistic way of emphasizing battle themes and

¹⁵⁴ The Book of Songs is the earliest poetry collection in China.

sadness at inevitable defeat as well as a way of stressing the difference of this ancient form from the softer poetic styles of later eras.

Fang Weiyi and Fang Weize also wrote politically-themed poems. In particular, Fang Weiyi has a significant number of historical and politically-themed poems still in existence; poems such as “Water from Mount Long” (*Long tou shui*, 陇头水), “Song of the Frontier” (*Saishang qu*, 塞上曲), “On the Frontier” (*Chusai*, 出塞), “Became a Soldier: A Ballad” (*Cong jun xing*, 从军行), and “A Veteran: A Ballad” (*Laojiang xing*, 老将行), and so on.

Weiyi and Weize’s political poems differ in style from those of Mengshi. They no longer reflect the gender differences in this type of poetry compared with the male poets. And the poetic genre they deploy – the ballad form – is used as a form of protest by many male poets, especially in times of unrest and warfare. Instead, they write directly from a neutral perspective (or it could be said they write more closely in line with the male perspective), which does not conform to the gendered perspective of their other poetic creations. Here I chose two poems written by Weiyi and Weize, both with the same title:

陇头水 Water from Mount Long By Fang Weiyi

陇坂带长流，关山古木秋。

Long rivers surround the hillsides of Mount Long, the ancient trees on the border have turned to autumn.

征人悲绝漠，戎马识边州。

The soldier was sad in the distant desert, the military horses knew the border area.

戈戟无霜冷，旌旗白日浮。

The weapon had become cold without the frost, the flag floated in the sky during the day.

君恩无可报，誓取郅支¹⁵⁵头。

I could not repay the kindness of the emperor, I swear to kill the enemy.

陇头水 Water from Mount Long By Fang Weize

马首望长安，春风陇水寒。

The horse's head faces towards Chang'an, and the spring breeze blew through the cold water.

¹⁵⁵ The original meaning of “郅支, zhizhi” is a Hun leader's name, which used to refer to the enemy in Chinese classical poetry.

坚冰开上谷，游沫聚桑乾。

The ice in the upper valley has melted, the floating foam gathered in the Sanggan
River.

烽燧云间合，旌旗雪后残。

The flames gathered among clouds, the flags tattered after the snow.

君恩犹未报，不敢说艰难。

I have not yet repaid the emperor's kindness, and I dare not say that the situation is
complicated.

Throughout history, numerous male poets have written political poems on the topic of "Water from Mount Long", such as the famous poet Lu You (陆游, 1125-1210) in the Song dynasty and Xiao Yi (萧绎, 508-555) in the Southern Liang dynasty. Mount Long has always been used by Chinese poets as a metaphor for the frontier. On this topic, Weiyi and Weize put themselves in the position of an expeditionary soldier and the poem describes the bitter cold of the frontier battlefield and the soldiers' strong determination to serve the court. Moreover, Weiyi and Weize use similar images in these two poems, such as the image of a cold scene, flags, and

the emperor's grace. Fang Weiyi also uses these images in her other political poem titled "Song of the Frontier" (*Saishang qu*, 塞上曲) to express her thoughts:

塞上曲 Song of the Frontier By Fang Weiyi

马上干戈常苦饥， Often exhausted and hungry when fighting on horseback,

边城秋月照寒衣。 the autumn moon of the border illuminated cold clothes.

风吹草木连山动， The blowing wind moved both grass and mountain,

霜落旌旗带雪飞。 the hoarfrost fell on the flag, snowflakes flying.

永夜厉兵传五鼓， The weapon was sharpened in the long night until dawn,

平明挥剑解重围。 soldiers raise swords to unlock the siege at dawn.

功成虽有封侯日， Although meritorious acts bring noble titles,

老将沙场安得归。 Can the veterans on the battlefield return home safely?

Fang Weiyi experienced the war period in the late Ming dynasty. At the time, the Qing government in the north had grown in strength and began to invade the Ming borders. The Ming government failed in the war and eventually lost their central power. Weiyi's political poems reflect the social conditions of this period and express her patriotic feelings towards the Ming. For example, the poem "Water from Mount

Long” (above) portrays the fearless image of frontier soldiers who kill the enemy and defend the country. The other poem “Song of the Frontier” describes complex feelings of veterans on the battlefield who defend the border all year round. These two poems express Weiyi’s participation in political topics. However, in these two poems, Weiyi only indirectly reflects on the current political situation. Another work by Weiyi “Hearing the Bandits while Traveling in Autumn” records the true events of her time:

旅秋闻寇 Hearing the Bandits while Traveling in Autumn by Fang Weiyi

蟋蟀吟秋户， The cricket is chirping on the window in autumn,

凉风起暮山。 The cold wind is blowing from the mountains in the evening.

衰年逢世乱， Meeting with the uneasy world in old age,

故国几时还。 When can I return to my hometown?

盗贼侵南甸， Thieves invade the southern countryside,

军书下北关。 Military documents are sent to the northern border.

生民涂炭尽， The people experience extreme hardship.

积血染刀镡。 And blood stains the sword hilt.

In this poem, the thieves refer to the peasant uprising army in the late Ming dynasty. The Fang sisters' hometown, Tongcheng, was besieged by the peasant army who opposed the Ming government and wreaked havoc on the city. At this time, Weiyi was forced to leave her hometown and move to Nanjing.¹⁵⁶ Weiyi's poetic work exposes the disastrous suffering caused by the war and the turmoil brought upon the people at that time. These politically-themed poems by the Mingyuan Poetry Club members are helpful for later audiences to better understand the chaotic period of the late Ming dynasty.

On the theme of politics, members of Mingyuan Poetry Club, especially the key figure of Fang Weiyi, adopted a military persona in the literary arena more often than the average female gentry poet. They realized that they could speak like ordinary male poets by touching on political themes in their poems. Evidently, female poets began experimenting and expanding their range of styles and themes to include topics formerly considered unsuitable for women writers. From the examples I have included here, it can be seen that some members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club were

¹⁵⁶ Song, *The Fang family of Tongcheng and their poetic works in Ming and Qing dynasty*, 181.

fully aware of the potential of poetry to give expression to the individual self through a variety of personae.

Poetic Pieces Among Members (Theme of Sisterhood)

Among the existing poems written by members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club, there are many examples of companion pieces responding to each other's poems and themes. Poetic reciprocation was an essential part of literary activities among poetry club members and indicates their close sisterhood and membership. Poetic reciprocation was a standard feature at male poetry gatherings as well. As mentioned in the previous chapter, women's access to education generally increased from the late Ming dynasty. Especially for these famous gentry families living in the same location, they shared similar family learning. Therefore, the sisters and their sisters-in-law in the Mingyuan Poetry Club had a similar literary foundation which helped them communicate with one another in creating poetry. From these companion pieces, it is possible to see both the simple activities of the poetry club but also the deep feelings of sisterhood among members. For example:

奉和伯姑张夫人如耀赠婿 Respectful Companion Piece to My Sister-in-law Mrs

Zhang's Poem to her Honored Son-in-law By Wu Lingyi

尚方拔剑羨卿卿， Pulling out the sword of Shangfang¹⁵⁷ caused everyone to admire
him,

曾听楼中两凤鸣。 it is known that there is marital harmony in this house.

兰畹春风多少意， The spring breeze blows through the orchid flowerbed with love,

紫芽初见一株荣。 a purple bud I saw for the first time has bloomed.

This poem was a companion piece to Fang Mengshi's poetic work "To My Honored Son-in-Law" (*Ru yao zeng xu*, 如耀赠婿). The word "Shangfang" suggests that this is a poem celebrating the promotion of Fang Mengshi's son-in-law. In addition to describing the protagonist's career success, the poem also mentions his marriage harmony. The focus on marriage harmony shows the difference between female poets and male poets.

A companion piece poem should follow the previous poem's genre, subject, original rhyme and content. The original piece by Fang Mengshi is no longer

¹⁵⁷ In imperial China, the Shangfang sword refers to the sword used by the emperor. The ministers who were given the Shangfang sword from the emperor have the privilege to do things first without the permission of the emperor, and report to the emperor afterwards.

available for reference although it can be assumed that Lingyi's poem follows closely the original poem's genre, subject, rhyme and content. This example gives an indication of how poetry club members acted in literary activities at that time.

Another activity that the Mingyuan Poetry Club recorded through their literary works was traveling together. Although they could not travel as freely as men due to their status, these gentry women, who shared the same interests, occasionally had the opportunity to go out together. Fang Weiyi records the experience of going out upon invitation from Mengshi:

暮春伯姊召登心远楼同诸美人宴饮玩月 My Older Sister Invited me to go to

Xinyuan Building in the Late Spring, Having Dinner and Enjoying the Moon with

Other Beautiful Women by Fang Weiyi

柔桑布谷鸣， The cuckoo called on the newly sprouting mulberry tree,

引袂叙平生。 holding on each other's clothes, women tell of their lives.

松月迎楼霭， The moon among the pine trees meets the clouds,

台花缀露清。 the flowers on the pavilion are dotted with clear dew.

绮罗娇国色， The beautiful women are all outstanding,

檀板杂歌声。 the sandalwood percussion mixes with everyone's singing.

不忍伶仃妹， My older sister could not bear to see me alone,

相邀慰苦情。 thus, invited me to be here to comfort my sadness.

This poem narrates the joyful scene of reunion between the poetry club members while also mentioning the writer's sister's awareness of her loneliness, suggesting how close the two women were to one another. In addition to going out together, some members of the poetry club would occasionally choose to stay with other members for literary and emotional communication. Fang Weize's poem "Spending the Night in My Sister's Room" (*Su zi qingfenge* 宿姊清芬阁) describes this activity:

宿姊清芬阁 Spending the Night in My Sister's Room By Fang Weize

边榻曾无寐， I used to stay up all night beside the bed,

长天不肯明。 and the sky refused to light up.

入帘疏月影， The sparse moonlight fell through the curtain,

高枕远风清。 pillowing the relaxed and comfortable breeze.

香气静生室， The aroma makes the bedroom quiet,

禅堂空拂云。 and the atmosphere in the Chan room¹⁵⁸ seems to touch the clouds.

相依能白首， The two of us can rely on each other until our hair turns grey,

古学自然成。 and the ancient studies can be naturally learned.

Both Weiyi and Weize's husbands died early. Therefore, they regarded each other as sharing similar experiences and feelings. They talked about their interests and thoughts and also comforted each other's loneliness and pain. This kind of close relationship can also be felt in Fang Weiyi's poem when she sees Weize off:

暮春与吴妹话别 Parting from Sister Wu in Late Spring By Fang Weiyi

扬子江边蒲柳华， The willows on the Yangtze River are flourishing,

征帆白日向天涯。 and the boat travels towards the horizon by day.

且将杯酒邀明月， Inviting the moon for a while with a glass of wine,

莫待春风吹落花。 do not wait for the spring wind to blow the flowers down.

别后重关多瘴气， The journey would be difficult and painful after the separation,

料应三载未归家。 you will not be able to return home for over three years.

¹⁵⁸ The Chan room is the place where believers follow the practices of the Chan School of Buddhism. Chan Buddhism is an indigenous form of Chinese Buddhism. This suggests a shift away from more orthodox Confucian forms of thought. Chan Buddhism thoughts may also have influenced Mingyuan Poetry Club members. Weiyi's nephew Fang Yizhi mentioned that Weiyi was good at painting the Buddhist goddess Guanyin, who was popular with women worshippers.

斯须聊复酬今夕， Let me briefly bless you tonight for this moment,

车马门前动晓霞。 the carriage will disturb the clouds in the morning.

This situation also occurred with Weiyi and her sister-in-law Wu Lingyi.

Lingyi's husband, who was Weiyi's younger brother, worked in another province

while Lingyi stayed home to take care of her children and parents-in-law. Lingyi lived

in her parents-in-law's house where Weiyi also resided, having been forced to return

due to her fate as a widow. Her poem to Weiyi shows the close relationship between

them:

呈姚维仪姑姊 To My Sister-in-law Weiyi By Wu Lingyi

与姑为伴十余年， Let me briefly bless you tonight for this moment,

胶漆金兰¹⁵⁹总不如。 we are so close just like real sisters.

忆得峨眉山下住， Remember when I lived under Mount Emei,

相思唯有一双鱼¹⁶⁰。 I could only express missing you through letters.

However, the eldest sister, Fang Mengshi, was always moving with her husband for his work. This meant she spent less time with the other members of the Mingyuan

¹⁵⁹ The original meanings of “金兰, jinlan” are gold and orchid, which used to refer to the sword brothers and sisters in Chinese classical poetry.

¹⁶⁰ In ancient China, the letters were put into a wooden-fish box for delivery, so the word “鱼, fish” used to refer to “letter” in Chinese classical poems.

Poetry Club. They chose to exchange poems by mailing letters to maintain the operations of the poetry club. In the existing poems of the Mingyuan Poetry Club, there are several poems exchanged by correspondence among Fang Mengshi, Fang

Weiwei, and Wu Lingyi:

Mengshi to Weiwei:

寄妹 Sent to My Sister By Fang Mengshi

江国成轻别， We met and hurriedly parted with each other by the river for the last time,

花开两见新。 and the flowers have bloomed twice more now.

桃阴依径远， A distant path under the shadow of the peach tree,

柳絮入帘亲。 catkins drifted through the curtain.

南浦逢寒雨， Cold rain dropped on the south side,

金陵值暮春。 and now Jinling city¹⁶¹ is in late spring.

淹留吾妹在， I want you to stay with me,

何日静风尘。 when can this wandering life stop?

¹⁶¹ Jinling is the older name of Nanjing.

Weiwei to Mengshi:

闻伯姊舟自粤归 On Hearing of My Elder Sister's Return from Yue¹⁶² by Ship

亭皋被白露， The flat ground by the water was covered with the white dew,

苍壁拥松杉。 the dark teal mountain wall embraced pine and fir trees.

故园何时到， When can you return to our old garden?

荒园犹未芟。 The barren garden has not been mowed.

秋风吹万里， The autumn wind blows thousands of miles,

夜月下孤帆。 and a lonely ship under the moonlight at night.

跋涉途中苦， The way back is hard,

清秋句不凡。 and this cold autumn is extraordinary.

得伯姊诗讯 Getting a Poem from My Older Sister By Fang Weiwei

秋深门径满蓬蒿， The path in front of the gate in late autumn was covered with

basil,

遥忆荆山车马劳。 and I remembered that the journey to Mount Jing was very hard.

江上孤舟愁日夕， The lone boat on the river felt sad day and night,

¹⁶² Yue refers to Guangdong province in China.

林中落叶委波涛。 the leaves left from the woods withered in the waves.

萧萧北雁寒烟汉， The wild geese were flying with the sound of wind and cold
smoke,

袅袅西风河汉高。 the westerly wind blew across the high Milky Way.

为道相逢重九菊， It is still difficult to reunite when the Chrysanthemum Festival
comes,

疏篱明月在东皋。 the lone moon hangs on the east field.

伯姊之粤有赠 To My Older Sister on Her Departure to Yue

昨岁长溪来， You came last year from Changxi,

今岁粤中去。 and this year departed for Yue.

此别又数年， Separated as we shall be for years to come,

离情复何语。 what remains to be said of our parting pain?

明发皖江渚， At dawn you'll set out from Wanjiang town,

山川隔烟雾。 the mountain river veiled by smoky mist.

皓月临苍波， A bright white moon shall survey blue-green waves,

春风满江树。 and spring's wind shall fill the river's trees.

(Yue refers to the southeastern region of China, especially the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi. Changxi is in northeastern Fujian province. Wanjiang town is probably Wancheng, on the Wan River in northern Anhui province.¹⁶³)

Lingyi to Mengshi:

三峡寄伯姑张夫人 Sent to My Sister-in-law Mrs. Zhang in the Three Gorges

三峡孤帆忆楚兰, Thinking of orchids when I stand at the lone sails of the Three Gorges,

丹崖翠壁坠云端。 beautiful rock walls and green mountain walls seem to fall from the sky.

欲将镜里琴中意, Wanting to know your thoughts and heart,

巧画裙拖寄妹看。 I hope you can draw it and send it to me.

These poems attest to the intimate relationships and feelings from the works written to each other by the member of the Mingyuan Poetry Club. They wrote companion pieces in response to other members' poems to show their connection and did not forget to send poems to members when they traveled. They also wrote many

¹⁶³ Chang and Saussy, "Shen Yixiu and Her Daughters, Ye Wanwan, Ye Xiaoman, and Ye Xiaoluan," 285.

poems expressing their thoughts and feelings of missing each other. For these members, the poetry club was a crucial medium for communicating their emotional feelings.

The poetic works by members of the Mingyuan Poetry Club were greatly influenced by the family. The members' similar family traditions of learning laid the literary foundation for the formation of the Mingyuan Poetry Club. Moreover, similar family experiences made their relationship closer, which laid the emotional foundation for the formation of the poetry club. The close relationship and communication among poetry club members meant their themes and writing styles shared many similarities. My analysis of the four categories of poetic themes used by members illustrates these similarities. The similarities among their poetic works on the themes of love, forms of grief, and politics were not only reflected in the topics of their poetry, but also in their writing skills, format, and imagery. The fourth category of companion pieces highlights how members in the Mingyuan Poetry Club actively engaged in poetic reciprocation with one another, illustrating the various poetic

activities that took place in this kinship-based poetry club, as well as the intimate relationship among its members.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis proposes a new way to conceptualize gentry women poetry clubs based on kinship ties during the late Ming and early Qing periods. This reconception of kinship-based poetry clubs rests on the importance of understanding how gentry women poets formed their poetry clubs under the influence of family to illustrate how they showed their literary talents through the poetry clubs.

Their male relatives influenced the establishment of female poetry clubs to some extent. The late Ming and early Qing periods were times of intense activity in the formation and practices of poetry clubs and, historically, the greatest number of clubs appeared during this time.¹⁶⁴ This increase in activity coincided with a period of political upheaval when many literati and officials were excluded by the treacherous court officials and eunuchs trusted by the emperor. These literati chose to remove themselves entirely from court or official life and return to their home regions. Many scholars who returned to their hometowns established poetry clubs as an arena to exchange ideas on both literary and political matters. After successful reforms

¹⁶⁴ Li, "The Literati Association in the Ming Dynasty," 77.

enacted by the famous official Zhang Juzheng, the economy developed rapidly and more individuals had the opportunity to receive an education. The increase in demand for books by educated people further stimulated the development of the publishing industry.

Taking the imperial examination and becoming an official in the court was no longer the only way for educated people to succeed. Many people began to have careers specializing in writing and publishing as way to achieve wealth. For instance, the husband of Shang Jinglan mentioned above came from a very wealthy book collector family. These people who worked in literature would spontaneously form poetry clubs and publish poetry collections together. Culture underwent significant change as well during this period and the School of Mind, which focused on the individual's self-awareness and was more open than the previous official ideology, became a widespread philosophy during this time. The School of Mind affected not only male scholars but also gentry women who received family learning from their male family members. They began to pursue the same literary activities as males, such as the formation of poetry clubs. However, due to the unique family culture in

imperial China, almost all women's activities took place in the inner chambers, which explains why most of the early female poetry clubs (both formal and informal) were formed by gentry women and kinship-based. The influence of the extended family structure on the formation of these female poetry clubs was inestimable.

The family influence on female kinship-based poetry club included many features. The first was the regional environment. As mentioned in Chapters 3 & 4, the representative kinship-based poetry clubs were all located along the Yangtze River. Shen Yixiu and her family were located in the Wujiang region; Shang Jinglan and her family lived in the Kuaiji region; the Banana Garden Poetry Club formed in Hangzhou city; and, Tongcheng was where the Mingyuan Poetry Club was located. These areas had relatively strong economies during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. They were all very close to Nanjing, the original capital city of the Ming dynasty. Therefore, cultural activities were also quite active in this region. All these gentry women who formed poetry clubs at this period came from influential and powerful families in the local area. Their families had sufficient financial resources to provide educational opportunities for their female family members.

Secondly, the male members of these influential families changed their views on the literary talents of women. They believed that educated women could, in turn, better educate their children and that women's literary talent could also help elite couples develop deeper communication in marriage. Therefore, the male relatives of kinship-based female poetry club members were willing to support the poetic activities of their female relatives. For example, Shen Yixiu's husband Ye Shaoyuan indicated that the ideal woman should have talent, virtue, and beauty. And Fang Weiyi's nephew Fang Yizhi considered his aunt to be comparable with any male scholar.

Analyzing the members and poetic works of the Mingyuan Poetry Club in Chapters 4 & 5, a pervading sense of sadness can be read in most of their poetry. This was due to the painful marital life they had experienced, another major impact of family life on the formation of female poetry clubs. The sense of sadness indicates that these gentry women were particularly sensitive to truncations in family life.¹⁶⁵ Family life and interactions deeply influenced the lives and poetic practices of these

¹⁶⁵ Ko, "Domestic Communities," 210.

gentry women. Most of the members in the kinship-based poetry clubs were connected by marriage. For example, the Mingyuan poetry club was composed of the three sisters in the Fang family and two sisters in the Wu family who were all connected through marriage.

In this poetry club, the members Fang Weiyi and Fang Weize both lost their husbands at a young age. After her husband's death, Weiyi returned to live in her parents' home because of conflict between her family and her husband's family. Her sister-in-law, Wu Lingyi, also lived in the same household, having stayed behind with her in-laws to take care of her children while her husband, Fang Kongzhao, worked as an official in another province. This kind of living situation meant Weiyi and Lingyi had the chance to be in each other's company for a long period of time. These two gentry women had close communication through poetry creation. Lingyi even treated Weiyi as her literary teacher and entrusted her children to Weiyi before she died. Weize, who had a similar life experience with Weiyi, often came to visit her cousin and sometimes she would spend the night with Weiyi. Weiyi's sister Fang Mengshi and Lingyi's sister Wu Lingze also visited them after they married. Family

gatherings under the influence of marriage became the main social space for the poetry club members to partake in poetic activities. They projected their family life and emotional feeling into their poetical works.

Poetry clubs became a place where these women comforted each other by communicating through poetry; they provided a window into the lives of gentry women and the socio-political environment in which they lived through their poetry and poetic exchanges. Many of their poems analyzed in Chapter 5 proved these points. The similarities in poetic themes and writing skills by the poetry club members reflects the influence of the family on both the poetry club and its members. Among the themes they explored, the theme of love mainly expressed how their lives were affected by marriage. The theme of forms of grief revealed the sadness caused by their family life. The political themes that emerge in works by the Mingyuan Poetry Club members show how they were influenced by their male relatives that held government positions.

Meanwhile, after receiving family learning, female poets could experiment with expanding traditional poetic themes. The companion pieces written between

members, showed their close relationship through kinship. The kinship-based female poetry club created a space for these talented female poets to comfort each other and directly express their emotional feelings through their literary talents. Poetry and poetry clubs became a perfect medium of expression for them.

However, most of the information we know or can infer comes from what gentry women or their family members tell us through texts influenced by specific social and cultural norms. These social and culture conventions permeate the poems and literary works produced by the Mingyuan Poetry Club and their family members and, to a certain extent, limit our ability to fully understand the lived experiences of gentry women at the time. By introducing readers to the translations of the Mingyuan Poetry Club members, this thesis can provide some insight into understanding the family life of upper-class gentry women. The pioneering translation efforts in this thesis will contribute to future scholarship. For example, it is mentioned in this thesis that many gentry husbands took official jobs in other cities, forcing their gentry wives to stay in their husband's hometown; this meant it was of central importance for these women to maintain close relationships with their husband's female relatives. Wu Lingyi's

poetic works show how upper-class women felt when they had to separate from their husbands, giving us significant insight into the mental state of gentry women during this period. Descriptions by Fang Weiyi and Fang Weize of their long lives lived as chaste widows illustrate the underlying sadness and mental anguish that comes from women having to live within the social conventions of that time.

In general, the family had a significant influence on the formation of female poetry clubs. The family structure during the late Ming and early Qing period and the formation of kinship-based female poetry clubs were mutually entwined. Familial restrictions on women's lives created a situation where the early poetry clubs formed by women inevitably were kinship-based. Moreover, the development of the clubs, the activities they undertook and the composition of their membership were entirely influenced by these gentry women's family. Factors like the location of the family, family learning, the marriage relationships, and the recognition of female literary talents by male relatives all had a significant impact on their development. These factors also laid the foundation for the female poetry clubs to change from kinship-based (private, family-centered) to public communities in the future.

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