


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Passion and Oppression under the Patriarchal Society of Qing China: The Extraordinary Bond between Li Ti (1805–1829) and Huang Xunying (1788–1829) and Their Double Suicide

Xiaorong Li 

University of California, Santa Barbara, USA  
Email: [lixiaor@ucsb.edu](mailto:lixiaor@ucsb.edu)

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## Abstract

This paper explores the intense bond formed between two Qing women, Li Ti and Huang Xunying, as well as their double suicide. The sheer survival of the rich personal and family narratives (in both poetry and prose) surrounding their relationship and suicides represents a startling discovery. By actively resisting the restrictions imposed by the patriarchal family and social order and explicitly defining an unbreakable union marked by moral commitment to and spiritual connection with each other, Li Ti and Huang embody the concept of queerness in today's usage. The two women's double suicide, furthermore, posed an extreme form of social protest and an individual quest for freedom. Despite being historically conditioned and ideologically mediated, the excavated primary sources, such as Li Ti's own poems, challenge not only the norms of their time and place, but also our scholarly consensus about women's lives in China's past.

**Keywords:** Women's writing; female–female friendship/companionship; marriage resistance; female suicide

## Introduction

This paper explores the story of two women Li Ti 李媿 (1805–1829) and Huang Xunying 黃巽英 (1788–1829) active in the first half of the nineteenth century in Qing China. They were cousins but developed an extraordinary bond that led to their double suicide. This story is extremely compelling for students of women's history and women's writing

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because its historically reliable textual records allow us to explore female bonding and suicide, not only in the voice of Li Ti herself but also from her family's perspective.

The primary source for this study is Li Ti's poetry collections as included in the *Shanghai Lishi Yiyuan sandai Qingfen ji* 上海李氏易園三代清芬集 (The pure-fragrance collection by three generations of the Li Family from the Yi Garden, hereafter abridged as *Qingfen ji*), which was put in print by Li Ti's grandnephew Li Weiqing 李味清 (1880–after 1940) in 1940.<sup>1</sup> It consists of eight individual collections (*bieji* 別集) of poetry and prose by six family members from the generations preceding Li Weiqing. Among them are two collections by his grand-aunt Li Ti, *Youdezhu lou shigao* 猶得住樓詩稿 (The *shi* draft from the Tower of this Intolerable Life) and *Youdezhu lou cigao* 猶得住樓詞稿 (The *ci* draft from Tower of this Intolerable Life). The collections of Li's writings have preserved 233 *shi* 詩 and 40 *ci* 詞 poems in addition to one prose piece she wrote to mourn her late father. Conforming to the conventions of traditional Chinese poetic culture, the poetic titles and attached head- and interlineal notes were provided to indicate the author's thematic concerns as well as under what circumstances the compositions were made. In other words, these poems can be read as rich autobiographical narratives.

In addition, we find in the family's collected writings about Li Ti and Huang Xunying by Li Ti's younger brother, Li Shangzhang 李尚璋 (1810–1870). His narrative shows that he and his sister were very close and he speaks highly of her. Five years his senior, Li Ti was a devoted sister, having played an important role in his upbringing. Not only did she tirelessly care for him like a mother when he was sick, but she also acted as an unflinching guide when they were receiving their literary education at home. Li Shangzhang was profoundly impacted by his sister's death. He wrote both *The Biography of My Late Sister Lixiang* (先姊吏香傳) and *Forty Poems Mourning Sister Lixiang* (哭吏香姊四十韻), in which he provides a close family member's perspective on Li Ti's life, her relationship with Huang, and their choice of suicide.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the survival of Li Ti's and her brother's writings, the exploration of the relationship of Li Ti and Huang Xunying as well as their suicides is centered on her and her family's perspectives. By examining both Li Ti's own narratives of her life and death, as well as the narratives by her family, I attempt to reconstruct her life trajectory, how it revolved around Huang, and how it ended with suicide. I will show how both her own and her brother's accounts are crucial for understanding this rare case of female suicide in relation to literary talent, marriage, gender norms, and personal sensibilities in the historical context of Qing China. For students of Ming-Qing women's history and culture, the story of Li Ti and Huang reflects a range of critical concerns that have been more or less explored by scholars already: literary women capable of

<sup>1</sup>For this study I use a modern reprint of the collection, edited by the Minhang Library and published by Zhejiang daxue chubanshe in 2017. I also consulted the two individual collections as included in Xiao Yanan, ed., *Qingdai guixiu ji congkan* 清代閩秀集叢刊 (Beijing: National Library, 2014), vol. 35, which has the same readings as in the family collections. According to Li Weiqing, some of the eight collections had been published before but this was the first time they were published together to preserve the family's legacy. He mentions that Li Ti's individual collections were published separately as *Youdezhu lou yigao* 猶得住樓遺稿 (The Surviving Drafts from the Tower of this Intolerable Life) by Li Pingshu 李平書 (1854–1927) in 1919. However, I have been unable to find this edition. See Li Weiqing, “Ba” 跋, in *Shanghai Lishi Yiyuan sandai Qingfen ji* 上海李氏易園三代清芬集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2017), 630–31 (henceforth *Qingfen ji*).

<sup>2</sup>See *Qingfen ji*, 405–6 and 448–49 respectively. Lixiang 吏香 is Li Ti's courtesy name. She is also known as Li Anzi 李安子 in some records.

representing and expressing themselves in poetry; young women delaying or refusing to marry in order to care for elderly parents; mismatched and miserable marriages; strong female bonds beyond kinship; and women committing suicide for various reasons. However, the case of Li Ti and Huang can still heighten our understanding of all these issues to another level.

The sheer survival of Li Ti's own poems about her life, her relationship with Huang, and their suicides, along with the larger family collections, constitutes a startling discovery. Previously discovered records condition what we know about history, but new discoveries never cease to surprise us. Although the surviving collections of Li Ti's poetry resulted from many rounds of deletions made by herself (according to Li Shangzhang) and possibly editorial efforts by her brother after her death, there is still a wealth of information and expression that unfold many compelling aspects of the story.<sup>3</sup> In traditional Chinese poetic culture, poetry is widely adopted as a technology of self-representation, a medium for self-recording and self-expression.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the autobiographical mode of Li Ti's poems echoes with the biographical mode of Li Shangzhang's writing in many ways. Both culturally recognized narratives of individual lives, they were produced and meant to be received as factual representations, shaped by their contemporary literary and ideological discourses. What I attempt to emphasize here, however, is how historically conditioned and ideologically mediated sites of self and life narrative such as Li Ti's still challenge not only the norms of their time and place, but also our scholarly consensus about women's lives in China's past.

Scholars in the studies of Ming-Qing women's culture have demonstrated that there exist fluid and ambiguous expressions of female-female intimacy in the continuum of sisterhood ←→ friendship ←→ romantic love.<sup>5</sup> In many ways they are derived from the conventions of male literati in representing heterosexual romantic love. Female poets Gu Zhenli 顧貞立 (1623–after 1672) and Wu Zao 吳藻 (1799–1863) are famous representatives of this mode of writing.<sup>6</sup> Whether in thematic concern or representational mode,

<sup>3</sup>There is no evidence that Li Weiqing was involved in editing or particularly promoted Li Ti's collections, even though his contemporary Republican era was more progressive on the subject of women's freedom and rights. In fact, he laments the loss of classical literary tradition during a time of national crisis. He included Li Ti's collections as part of the family's legacy. The unavailable 1919 publication of Li Ti's collections by Li Pingshu might have been produced out of a sympathy with and particular interest in Li Ti. For a study of Li Pingshu's role in late Qing and early Republican Shanghai, see Huang Jianmei 黃健美, "Shanghai shishen Li Pingshu yanjiu" 上海仕紳李平書研究 (PhD diss., Fudan University, 2011).

<sup>4</sup>On poetry as autobiography, see Grace Fong, "Shi poetry of the Ming and Qing Dynasties," in *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*, edited by Zong-Qi Cai (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 366–74. For a study of how a woman used the prose form of diary as a technology of the self in socialist China, see Daniela Licandro, "Beyond Overcoming: A Woman Writer's Articulation of Pain in Socialist China," *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China* 23.1 (2021), 301–36.

<sup>5</sup>For a study of the ambivalent nature of female-female relationships as expressed in Ming-Qing poetic discourse, see Maureen Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China," *Late Imperial China* 13.1 (1992), 63–110, at 97–98. Similar expressions can be found in Ming-Qing fiction. See Martin Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), Chapter 7, "Qing and Homoerotic Desire in *Bian er chai* and *Lin Lan xiang*," 176–205.

<sup>6</sup>Sang Tze-Lan has discussed the case of Wu Zao against the backdrop of female-female relations in premodern China. See Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) 37–65. On Gu Zhenli's literary expression of same-sex love and desire, see Li Xiaorong, "Representing the Feminine 'Other': Gu Zhenli's (1623–after 1672) Poems to her Female Friends," *Journal of Oriental Studies* 48.2 (2016), 19–38.

Li Ti's expression of her desire and passion for Huang echoes these women's voices. However, because of the plethora of poems scattered in their collections, scholars have tended to treat Gu's and Wu's voicing of romantic feelings for their female others mainly as the performance of a masculine gesture rather than based on real relationships. Li Ti's special bond with Huang Xunying is well documented by the substantial textual evidence of the family collection. The large number of poems from the two collections by Li Ti explicitly written about and to Huang, together with additional information (such as the interlinear notes) and cross-references by her brother, provide the first historical (as opposed to literary) record for us to examine a premodern same-sex relationship between women. In the remainder of this paper, I will demonstrate how these two women actively resisted the restrictions imposed by the patriarchal family and social order and explicitly defined an unbreakable union marked by moral commitment to and spiritual connection with each other. I argue that their bond embodies the concept of queerness in today's usage.

### Kinship, Friendship, and More: Li Ti and Huang Xunying

Li Ti and Huang Xunying were cousins whose mothers were sisters. In the biography written for Li Ti, Li Shangzhang describes how these two cousins quickly formed an inseparable bond:

Originally, our maternal cousin Huang Xiangya, whose given name is Xunying, was 13 years older than my sister and lived in Shizilin of Wu (Suzhou).<sup>7</sup> She swore not to marry so as to take care of her parents. In the year of Xinwei (1811), when my late father returned home because of the death of our grandmother,<sup>8</sup> my sister met [Xiangya] and immediately felt they had already been together in their former lives. Whenever Xiangya came to visit, they spent all their time together from morning to night, inseparable from each other as if they were glued together. They pledged to have a relationship in life and death. After she returned home, they entrusted their feelings into *shi* and *ci* verses, which did not let the mailbox go empty even for one day. They continued like this until both came home from Wu. While they were privately cherishing that their shapes and shadows could accompany each other constantly, they also increasingly steeled their will to follow each other in death should one die.

初，從母姊黃香崖女史名吳英長十有三歲，家吳門獅子林，矢志侍親不字。辛未，先府君奉諱南歸，姊一見若逢夙契。香崖來，得共晨夕，密若膠漆，誓為死生交。歸則詩詞寄懷，郵筒無虛日。至是自吳挈與俱來，竊喜形影之常可相隨，而同死之心益堅矣。<sup>9</sup>

Li Ti was only six years old when she developed a deep connection with Huang, who was much older than she. However, if we can take literally Li Shangzhang's lines written elsewhere about her—"at the age of three she became literate, at ten she was versed in

<sup>7</sup>Another record, which was most likely derived from Li Shangzhang's account, indicates that Huang was 12 years senior to Li Ti, which may be an error. See Guang Tiefert, *Anhui mingyuan shici zhenglie* (Anqing: Anqing dongfang yinshuguan, 1936), 3.14–15.

<sup>8</sup>Li Linsong wrote an epitaph for his mother Madam Tang; see *Qingfen ji*, 155.

<sup>9</sup>*Qingfen ji*, 406. The modern reprint has an error, indicating the age as 35 years old.

literature”—Li Ti was indeed precocious and able to express her feelings toward Huang in writing immediately after they met.<sup>10</sup> And if the account of Li in the passage cited above is not exaggerated, the two cousins exchanged poetry every day when they could not be together physically. Although Huang Xunying’s writing is not available, we have Li Ti’s rich account in verse detailing her special relationship with Huang.

While her brother outlines in a factual manner how Li Ti developed a deep attachment to Huang, Li Ti’s own poems express her subjective feelings for Huang as well as her view of the nature of their relationship. Among the 273 poems included in Li Ti’s collections, there are 19 *shi* and 8 *ci* explicitly noted in the title as written to or about her cousin Huang Xunying, whom she refers to as Sister Xiangya. The large number of poems Li wrote to and about Huang also demonstrates that Huang was constantly in her thoughts, evident in the recurring poetic titles/themes, such as:

Thinking of Sister Xiangya on the Mid-Autumn Night

中秋夜懷香崖姊

Thinking of Sister Xiangya on the New Year’s Day of the Year Jimao

己卯元日懷香崖姊

Remembering Sister Xiangya While Listening to Rain on a Spring Night

春夜聽雨憶香崖姊

Sister Xiangya Has not Arrived, Her Trip Delayed

遲香崖姊不至

Having Received a Letter from Sister Xiangya, to Which I am Responding [with this Poem]

得香崖書卻寄

In Late Spring, I Think of Sister Xiangya

暮春懷香崖姊

In addition, in the other poems without such titles, Li Ti often includes interlinear notes to reveal to the reader that the line is referencing Sister Xiangya. These poems are an outstanding presence in the collections and outnumber those with any other thematic concerns, revealing that Huang was the most important relationship in Li Ti’s life.

Li Ti and Huang met each other because of kinship, practically the only way for cloistered, elite women to develop social connections beyond core family members, but they became more than cousins or sisters. A deep relationship of multiple dimensions can be discerned in the following song lyric Li Ti wrote, *To the Tune Mai Potang* (邁陂塘), with the subtitle “Composed when I had a drink with Sister Xiangya on the Day Before the Winter Solstice” (小至日與香崖姊小飲作):

Feeling strange tonight,  
I’m afraid to recite Du Fu’s lines,  
Which I put aside by the moonlit window.  
It’s because the plum has blossomed against the chill,  
And she cannot stay long.  
The willow trees at the riverbank  
Are about to sprout  
Into slim leaves, but I don’t want to think of separation.

<sup>10</sup>See “Forty Poems Mourning My Sister Lixiang” (哭吏香姊四十韻), *Qingfen ji*, 448.

Let's not open our lips,  
 But entrust all the feelings about parting from our heart  
 And the sorrows expressed from our knitted eyebrows  
 Into the wine in the jade cup.  
 Grief lingers as if a thread,  
 How can one stand it?!  
 Putting down the wine cup suddenly, we lowered our heads.  
 Heaven is jealous of one with talent, of which we are not short.  
 Heaven is also jealous of one with feelings, of which we have more.  
 From now on,  
 We will still be  
 Bosom friends, while one is at the Gate of Wu and the other by the Shen River.  
 The winter chill will disappear after the Eighty-First Day,<sup>11</sup>  
 Can my thoughts of you, as well as the thousands of feelings it generates,  
 Be dispelled without divination?

怪今宵，怕吟杜句，盡拋明月窗右。因他梅蕊衝寒破，人又羈留難久。隄畔柳，竟欲展，纖纖不念將分手。且休啟口，把心上離情，眉尖別恨，付與瓊中酒。愁如綫，如許添來怎受，停盃驀地低首。才為天忌原非少，天忌多情亦有。從此後，依舊是，吳門申浦同懷友。寒消九九，者【這】一種相思，千般滋味，未卜可消否。<sup>12</sup>

Most of the poems about Huang were written while the two were separated. This is one of a few depicting their moments together, but it is still mainly concerned with separation. The description of plum blossoms and willow sprouts suggests that spring is around the corner, but they will not be able to enjoy it together. However, they take comfort in the fact that they share the same heart and mind even when apart. *Tonghuai* 同懷 could mean sharing the same thoughts and feelings, or it could refer to biological ties. Viewing themselves as *tonghuai* plus *you* 友 (friends), Li Ti makes it clear that her relationship with Huang is based not only on kinship but also friendship.

In addition to friendship, *qing* 情 and *xiangsi* 相思 are two key words recurring in the poems Li wrote to and about Huang. *Qing* in Chinese is a broad term that can mean any kind of emotion, feeling, sentiment, or specifically love and passion, depending on the context. The *qing* Li and Huang had for each other, as Li Ti suggests in the following lines, seems beyond the general parameters of feeling two cousins would normally have for one another:

Heaven is too meddlesome,  
 Having feelings concentrated on the both of us.  
 While I, from afar, pity the autumn moon,  
 You, bitterly, resent the spring wind.  
 Clouds and mountains separate us over a thousand miles,  
 Hundreds of kinds of Innermost feelings have been generated.  
 This year we shed tears in distant lands,  
 This is the anniversary of the night when we sealed our pact.  
 蒼蒼太多事，鐘得兩人情。

<sup>11</sup> According to traditional Chinese seasonal divisions, winter is over 81 days after the Winter Solstice.

<sup>12</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 388.

秋月遙憐我，春風怨煞卿。  
雲山千里隔，懷抱百端生。  
今歲他鄉淚，當年此夕盟。<sup>13</sup>

In the first two lines, Li is blaming Heaven for being “meddlesome” in bonding them with the strong emotions they have, which suggests the excessiveness or unusual nature of their emotional attachment. The images of the autumn moon and spring wind as well as the pronouns of endearment and intimacy (*qing* 卿 and *wo* 我) all fall into the categories of romantic pathos and rhetoric. The mention of the pledge they made before in the last line, without revealing what it was, sums up the exclusive relationship they formed between themselves.

*Xiangsi* is a much less ambiguous term. Although it can be generally used to describe the mood in which one obsessively thinks of or misses another person, since the Tang it has been increasingly applied to the context of romantic love, expressing constant longing or even lovesickness. By Li Ti’s time, the latter meaning had become commonplace. In any case, *xiangsi* depicts a state of infatuation, an obsessive attachment. Let us read her song “To the Tune of Two with One Heart (Liang tongxin 兩同心): Thinking of Sister Xiangya” (Huai Xiangya zi 懷香崖姊):

Brooding over the taste of spring,  
All sorts of sentiments  
Are tangled like thousands of branches of the weeping willows,  
Or more precisely, deep sorrows at the sight of an expanse of fragrant grasses.  
I ask: when can we hold each other’s hands in front of flowers,  
Without troubling the blue bird as messenger?  
Who has made us long for each other?  
The Lord laughs at us: it is humans who are full of feelings,  
Rather than Heaven that has made such trouble.  
I hope the east wind can blow away the roots of sorrow,  
Leaving us without knowing anything.  
細味春來，者般懷抱，有千條緒似垂楊，更一片恨如芳草。問何時握手花前，無勞青鳥？究竟相思誰造，天公笑道，是人間忒殺多情，非天上生成煩惱。倩東風吹去愁根，風辭不曉。<sup>14</sup>

No matter how we might define in modern terms the feelings expressed here, this song expresses the author’s desire for the two women to be with each other in the most evocative language she knew.

Both Li Ti and Huang resisted arranged marriage, although Li Ti was unable to avoid marriage in the end. Li Shangzhang’s narrative suggests that Huang had pledged not to marry before she met Li Ti, but Li Ti’s poem titled, “My Cousin Huang Xiangya [Xunying] Decided Not to marry in Order to Serve Her Parents, Which Moved Me into this Composition for Her” (黃香崖姊與英侍親不字慨賦以贈), shows that the two had already formed a special bond:

The bright pearl has sunk to the abyss’s bottom,  
Mother shouldn’t have tried to change her mind up till now.

<sup>13</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 350.

<sup>14</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 385.



Her ill-fate is as thin as clouds above the autumn mountain,  
 Her feelings are deeper than the water of the spring river.  
 Going to the secular world, who would cherish your noble bones?  
 This life of yours has only allowed me to be the one who understands you.  
 Above the Five Pine Mountain shines the moon,  
 Brightly revealing the whole heart of that special person.<sup>15</sup>

淵裏明珠到底沉，北堂何必勸於今。  
 命惟秋岫雲同薄，情較春江水更深。  
 入世誰憐卿傲骨，此生獨許我知音。  
 五松皎皎天空月，朗照伊人一片心。

Comparing Huang to a bright pearl, spring river, and the moon, images that evoke pure, lofty, and powerful spiritual and sentimental qualities, Li expresses her deep admiration for Huang. While Li Ti's or Huang's mother (referred as North Hall in the original line) tried to talk her out of her unconventional decision, Li on the contrary openly endorsed her. The third couplet once again contrasts how different she is from others for Huang. Note her expression in the second line of this couplet is not that she claims to be the only *zhiyin* 知音 of Huang in this world, but that Huang accepts nobody but her. The term *zhiyin*, literally meaning "[the one] understanding the music," is derived from the story of the zither player Bo Ya 伯牙 and his only understanding audience, Zhong Ziqi 鍾子期. After Zhong passed away, Bo Ya decided not to play zither again, so he broke it into pieces. Hence the term defines a high level of friendship based on mutual appreciation and moral commitment.<sup>16</sup> This is the first poem written by Li Ti to and about Huang that appears in the collection, which was most likely written no later than 1819 when she was fourteen years old.<sup>17</sup> In the title or headnote of the poem, Li refers to Huang with her full name and the official kinship term, *biaozi* 表姊 (female maternal cousin), but what is expressed in the poem marks the significant change of their relationship from kinship to friendship and even more. Except for this poem in which Li Ti calls Huang *biaozi* once, she calls her Sister Xiangya in all of the other poems. It is noteworthy that *zi* 姊 is a kinship term, but it can be used generally in Chinese culture to refer to any female who is senior to the speaker.

Unlike Huang, Li Ti did get married. For her marriage, her brother Li Shangzhang states:

At a young age, she was arranged to marry a certain man from the Fang clan in Tongcheng. In February of the year Dinghai (1827), they married and lived in the Yi Garden of her natal residence. My brother-in-law Chuanlie was by nature a simpleton who could not distinguish beans from wheat even after he reached adulthood. However, he was extremely quick-tempered and violent. Viewing the conjugal relationship as a feud between enemies, he frustrated, abused, and tormented my

<sup>15</sup>*Qingfen ji*, 335.

<sup>16</sup>For a record of the story, see *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Rpt. Lingyan shuguan 靈岩山館藏版, 1788), 14.4b, available through the Chinese Text Project, <https://ctext.org/library.pl>.

<sup>17</sup>Since it is placed before another poem titled "On the New Year's Day of The Year of Jimao (1819) I Thought of Sister Xiangya" ([己]卯元日懷香崖姊). The copy of *Qingfen ji* I use for this study shows the year is 乙卯, which is either 1795 or 1855. This must be a typographical error, since either year is outside the dates of Li Ti's life. The original character should be "己," as I have emended it.



sister to the extent no human could stand, but my sister took it obediently without any expression of resentment.

幼締姻桐城方氏。丁亥二月，贅於易園。姊婿傳烈素駮蠹，弱冠不辨菽麥，而性極暴戾，視伉儷若仇讐，挫虐蹂躪，人所難堪，而姊順受無怨色。<sup>18</sup>

Li Ti's marriage appears to be a childhood arrangement made by the two families involved, and according to her brother's account she followed through with it and accepted it even after it turned out to be an ordeal. However, Li Ti's poems tell us a different story. In more than one place, Li Ti does express how she has or should have fulfilled the role of wife or that of daughter-in-law, but she also explicitly complained about her husband and suffering brought about by marriage.<sup>19</sup> As Li Shangzhang notes, her marriage with Fang Chuanlie was matrilocal at first, but for some reason the couple moved back to Tongcheng of Anhui Province, the husband's hometown. This was an even worse turn for Li Ti, whose strong reaction to this uprooting move can be seen in her composition of "Random Notes on the Way to Tongcheng: Twenty Poems" (歸桐道中偶紀二十首).<sup>20</sup> "For twenty-three years I have been the innocent daughter of my parents, / A swallow leaving its nest, I hate that I'm not a man" (二十三年膝下慙，燕分巢去恨非男). "How many tears have been shed into the green river, / With which my sorrow will flow to Changzhou [the author's note: I refer to Sister Xiangya]" (多少淚珠彈綠水，可能流恨到長洲 [謂香崖姊])<sup>21</sup> These lines and the interlinear note convey not only her resentment of women's disadvantaged position in marriage in general, but also her sorrow at leaving behind the person for whom she particularly cared.

Almost immediately after she moved to Tongcheng, Li Ti composed a group of "Six Poems Mourning Myself" (自悼六首), lamenting that this marriage had already killed her inside.<sup>22</sup> Having protested over her mismatched husband (to which I will return later), Li Ti goes on to express her regrets at having married in the first place: "I shouldn't have degraded myself then to the vulgar earth, / Looking back now I long to be in the Immortal's Realm" (不合當初下俗埃，回頭今始憶蓬萊). Furthermore, the last poem in the group suggests that she failed to reciprocate the obligation towards Huang, for they had probably sealed a pact together that neither of them would marry:

Whether felt strongly or lightly, [it] leaves no traces,  
But having entered my bones and haunted my heart, it has a root.  
With incense, we pledged to Heaven from the Country of the Sea,  
On a horse, one came to urge the guest to pass the Gate of Wu.  
I'm born to be a romantic, which is not a blessing.  
I'm deeply grateful to have one who knows me, one who I have also let down.  
Let's not forget those heart-to-heart words even after we die,  
Mountain Wan does not sustain my soul as a poet.  
濃無蹤跡澹無痕，入骨縈心自有根。

<sup>18</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 405.

<sup>19</sup> For lines in which Li expresses how she understands normal wifely roles, see, for example, "I'm willing to remove my hairpins to supply meals for my husband" (願拔釵供夫子饌) in *Qingfen ji*, 371, and "while I'm frugal in buying clothing and jewelry, I'm diligent in managing well and mortar" (儉在裙釵，勤於井臼) in *Qingfen ji*, 396–37.

<sup>20</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 347–48.

<sup>21</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 347.

<sup>22</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 349–50.

一瓣格天盟海國，片驃催客過吳門。  
 生成情種原非福，感煞知音已負恩。  
 到死莫忘相印語，皖山端不着詩魂。<sup>23</sup>

Although the subject is missing from the first two lines, which has been rendered by “it” in my English translation, it is Li Ti’s spiritual connection with Huang, where her heart lies. Li Ti then goes on to work three important places in her life into the remainder of the poem: The Country of the Sea (Haiguo) in the third line presumably means Shanghai, where Li Ti was born, grew up, and made her pledge with Huang. The Gate of Wu (Wumen) in the parallel fourth line is a variant name of Suzhou, the hometown of Huang. This line is a bit of a puzzle, but given the context two readings are possible. First, it can describe how Li Ti was urged to move on to her destination when she visited Huang in Suzhou on her way to Tongcheng, Anhui. The one riding on a horse could be her husband or someone sent on behalf of her husband. Alternatively, it can depict how Huang was urged to marry by her family. The horse rider could represent a matchmaker or messenger. In either case, this line hints at the pressure that would break the pledge they had made. From Li Ti’s earlier poem expressing her admiration for Huang’s sworn celibacy, we know that she and Huang were exclusively *zhiyin*: “This life of yours has only allowed me to be the one who understands you.” Hence the repeated reference to *zhiyin* in the sixth line is unmistakably a reference to Huang. Li Ti’s sense of *fu’en* 負恩 (failing to reciprocate the obligation) is towards her, presumably due to the situation in which Huang swore not to marry, but Li Ti followed through with the marriage arranged for her. Mount Wan, a landmark of Anhui mentioned in the last line, refers to where marriage landed her, but her poet’s soul refuses to settle there.

Eventually, as her brother suggests, Li Ti was able to get herself out of her marriage in an extreme way:

In the fifth month of that year, they returned to Tongcheng. In August our father passed away. She heard of the news in November and was so devastated that she almost died. She attempted to hang herself twice but stopped after her mother-in-law took pains to talk her out of it. In May of the year Wuzi (1828), it was decided to have her return to her natal home. Having determined there was no hope to come back alive, she bid farewell to her parents-in-law but was so choked with emotions that she was unable to speak. She arrived home in August. Although it pained her that she was not there when father passed away, she took comfort that she was able to serve mother.

五月歸桐城，八月先府君棄養，十一月聞訃，一痛幾絕。雉經者再，姑曲慰之，乃止。戊子五月歸寧，自分質孱命薄，此行無生還望，拜別君姑，哽咽不能成聲。八月至家，雖痛父歿之不親見，而得侍慈闈，意良慰。<sup>24</sup>

While the brother’s narrative focuses on how the father’s death devastated Li Ti and that it was because of her delicate health that she returned to her natal home, the following song lyric by Li Ti provides a different rationale from her perspective:

How devastating it is to the daughter,

<sup>23</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 350.

<sup>24</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 405.

Whose esteemed father, the exemplar in the family  
 Rode on clouds and returned to the Immortal Isle.  
 Diligent for a year, his studious hand  
 Had completed several volumes on astronomy  
 Before his autumn had reached its end.  
 His frail surviving daughter,  
 Is returning to her natal home, destined by an ill fate to live out her life in a  
 diminished world.  
 Having tasted her fill of the ways of the world,  
 She finally realizes that everything is just illusory flowers.  
 A floating life such as this,  
 Would be better off after severing the worldly bond.  
 Glancing back slightly,  
 I realize the mother-in-law in the north hall is old.  
 But how can there be a lack of one who can blend a stew for her?  
 Let him plant new jades in the field,<sup>25</sup>  
 One who can serve the white-headed one with a genial expression.  
 How vast is the river.  
 But I find it hardly fortunate  
 That the two who share the same heart haven't yet transformed into lovesick birds<sup>26</sup>  
 [The author's note: I mean Sister Xiangya].  
 I'd better extricate myself before it is too late,  
 So that the ocean-deep sorrow  
 And the mountain-high regret  
 Can all be swept away like fallen flowers.

痛兒家，庭前嚴父，駕雲已返蓬島。辛勤一載修書手，幾冊天文成了。秋未杪，  
 有弱女，歸寧命薄乾坤小。世情嚼飽。覺萬事空花，浮生若此，斬卻俗緣好。  
 微回首，也曉北堂姑老，調羹豈乏人到？讓他新玉田忙種，可奉白頭色笑。江  
 淼淼，差可幸，同懷未化相思鳥 [謂香崖姊]。抽身及早，把海樣深愁，山般閒  
 恨盡似落花掃。<sup>27</sup>

This song lyric is attached with a subtitle that reads, “Moved by the Return to My Natal Home; Using the Rhymes of My Late Father’s Poem, ‘Pleased to See Gray among the Black Hair’” (歸寧有感，用先大人喜見蒜發韻). The term *guining* normally refers to a married daughter’s occasional visit to her own parents, but Li Ti’s addressed in the song is determined to be a permanent leave from her marriage. By “the worldly bond” (*suyuan* 俗緣) at the end of the first stanza, she means her marriage in particular. Her reflection in

<sup>25</sup>This line alludes to the story of Yang Boyong 楊伯雍, who planted jades in the fields of Lantian and found an ideal match for marriage. See Gan Bao 干寶, *Soushen ji* 搜神記 (Beijing: The Foreign Languages Press, 2004), 11.388–389.

<sup>26</sup>Presumably this refers to the image of cuckoo (*dujuan* 杜鵑), which, in legend, is transformed by Emperor Wang after he lost his kingdom and lover. For a record of the legend, see Li Fang 李昉, *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 166.937. For poetic lines similar to Li Ti’s way of using the image, see, for example, the Ming poet Wang Tingxiang’s 王廷相 (1474–1544), “The one who is rich in love has turned to be a lovesick bird, /It is the cuckoo that cries every night in City Wu” (情多化作相思鳥，夜夜蕪城啼杜鵑). See *Shicang lidai shixuan* 石倉歷代詩選, in *Qinding siku quanshu: jibu 8* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987–1989), 473.48b.

<sup>27</sup>*Qingfen ji*, 393.

the subsequent lines on her filial responsibility towards the aged mother-in-law confirms this meaning. Then, by suggesting that the husband should find a new wife, she exempts herself from her duty as a daughter-in-law. The song's concluding lines together with the interlineal note, however, reveal her real commitment was to her beloved Sister Xiangya.

Li Ti and Huang were finally reunited even before she arrived home. An interlineal note from Li Ti's "Random Notes on Returning to My Natal Home: 24 Poems" (歸寧偶記二十四首) reads, "At the time I came back together with Sister Xiangya from Suzhou to Shanghai" (時自吳門偕香崖姊同至雲間).<sup>28</sup> Suzhou is between Tongcheng and Shanghai on her route of travel. Whether at their request or out of a family arrangement, Li went to Suzhou first to join Huang for Huang to accompany Li home. The following poems from the aforementioned group appear to record what she saw and thought on their way to Shanghai:

## No. 13

Pushing open the boat's window I see clouds randomly appearing in the blue sky.  
Following the autumn wind, now they gather then depart.  
Wishing we were like a pair of gulls,  
Amid the reeds or on the water, never left alone  
[The author's note: referring to Sister Xiangya].  
推篷偶見碧天雲，隨著秋風聚又分。  
願學一雙鷗最好，蘆中水上不離群 [調香崖姊]。

## No. 23

A caged crane is returning to her pavilion from the end of the world.  
In a trance, she was as if waking from a dream.  
Regarding the household matters, words become noisy.  
Absent-minded, she wasn't really listening.  
天涯籠鶴返華亭，恍惚三更夢乍醒。  
問到家庭言瑣瑣，出神還似未曾聽。

## No. 24

Why would one bother to degrade themselves in the Red Dust for long?  
Dusting it off with my sleeves, I would rather be an outsider.  
The Creator may give us a little slack,  
Allowing a green mountain to bury our two carefree selves  
[The author's note: referring to Sister Xiangya].<sup>29</sup>  
紅塵何苦久沈淪，拂袖甘為局外人。  
造物可能寬一綫，青山埋我兩閒身 [調香崖姊]

Poem #13 projects Li Ti's view from their boat journey. While the floating clouds remind her of the uncertainty of destiny, the paired birds affirm the life she desires to lead with her beloved. Poem #24, the last one in the group, echoes the wish expressed in the

<sup>28</sup>Qingfen ji, 359–60.

<sup>29</sup>Qingfen ji, 360.

previous lines—that destiny will allow them to live their dreams. Although this last poem already hints at their determination to die together, it still conveys more a life wish if read in relation to the preceding poem #23, in which Li compares herself to a caged bird set free. The subsequent mention of her absent-mindedness about household matters also shows her attitude towards the mundane world. Hence, by leaving “the Red Dust” (紅塵), she means to transcend, in religious terms, the restrictions and sufferings of human society, not necessarily leave the human world. The term “carefree selves” (閒身) in the concluding line echoes “an outsider” (局外人) in the second, emphasizing that they were freed from family responsibilities. “Allowing a green mountain to bury our two carefree selves” in the context of the group of poems can be just a figure of speech that refers to living up to their lifespans.

The following song shows that if their society had allowed it, the two would have lived their lives together, not only as friends, but more:

Eagerly I look forward to seeing my soulmate  
 [The author’s note, referring to Xiangya zi].  
 Docked in Suzhou,  
 A light boat as if a leaf,  
 We could have briefly expressed our feelings over our separation.  
 She who is able to escape the worldly nets is truly enlightened,  
 Embroidering the image of buddha and living with her mother.  
 She has sworn not to serve others with dustpan and broom.  
 While you are destined to have no one, I am ill-fated.  
 But let’s wish in the next life to be a match made in heaven.  
 A wild fancy it may be,  
 But who knows if Heaven won’t have mercy?

盼切忘形友[調香崖姊]。泊姑蘇，輕舟一葉，離情略剖。塵網能逃真達者，繡佛而依阿母。誓不願，奉人箕帚。卿忒緣慳儂命薄，但相期來世為嘉偶。雖妄念，天憐否？<sup>30</sup>

This is the first stanza of one of Li Ti’s songs in “Ballad of the Golden Threads: Ten Songs” (金縷曲十闕). She begins by calling Huang her *wangxing you* 忘形友, literally meaning a friend with whom one forgets their physical being or shape. Following *zhiyin* and *tonghuai you*, this may be an even loftier term that defines their friendship. Originally this term was coined by male literati such as Bai Juyi 白居易 of the Tang.<sup>31</sup> Here Li Ti appropriates it to define her spiritual connection with Huang, who is truly a soulmate for her.

However, the term *jia’ou* 嘉偶 (a match made in heaven) that she uses near the end of this stanza points to something that is significantly different from friendship. Since the Han, this term has referred to a perfect couple,<sup>32</sup> typically a husband–wife relationship. And that is the way Li Ti uses it. In this stanza, she reiterates Huang’s rejection of marriage as out of both religious and filial piety. Her lamentation for their ill fate, however, is not

<sup>30</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 390.

<sup>31</sup> Bai Juyi’s lines read, “I have friends with whom we forget our form, / They are Li and Yuan from afar” (我有忘形友，迢迢李與元). See *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 428.4723.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of *jia’ou* as the meaning of “a perfect mate” or “a perfect match” with examples of companionate marriage from the Ming–Qing era, see Weijing Lu, *Arranged Companions: Marriage and Intimacy in Qing China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), 60–68.

simply about marriage in general, but that they were not destined to be husband and wife, hence the wish to become an ideal couple in the next life. Remarkably, she also admits the wish to be a *wangnian* 妄念, which can be understood as a wild fancy against probability or an improper thought challenging social norms. In either case, the term indicates their awareness of the odds against them being together as a couple, even in the next life, if only Heaven would make that happen.

### The Double Suicide

Li Ti and Huang Xunying were never separate again after they were reunited when Li Ti left her husband. For some reason, the two traveled back to Suzhou in January of 1829. It is unknown whether they returned to Shanghai, but eventually they ended their lives in Suzhou in late May. Li Shangzhang briefly describes how this happened:

The next year [1829], out of a plan to avoid the summer heat, Xiangya took my sister to travel back to Wu, and they stayed in Shizilin. Soon after, Xiangya fell out with her mother and threw herself into a lake. My sister also drowned herself. The time was the hour of Hai (21:00–23:00 o'clock) on the twenty-seventh day of the fifth month of the year of Jichou (1829). She was 25 sui and without offspring. Alas! How heartbreaking!

越明年, 香崖偕姊遊吳, 遂居獅林, 為避暑計。無何, 香崖不得於母, 投池死, 姊亦自沉, 時己丑五月二十七日亥時也。年 [二] 十五歲, 無出, 傷哉!<sup>33</sup>

According to Li Shangzhang, it was in order to avoid the summer heat that Li Ti and Huang went to Suzhou.<sup>34</sup> Shizilin, as Li Shangzhang notes earlier in the biography, is the location of Huang's natal home. Presumably they stayed in the same house with Huang's mother. Li Shangzhang does not explain why Huang did not get along with her mother, but suggests that the conflict between the two was a direct cause of Huang's suicide and subsequently Li Ti's.

Li Ti's and Huang's suicides were recorded from the late Qing to the Republican period in local gazetteers, modern newspapers, and other print media, which mostly appear to be derived from Li Shangzhang's biography of Li Ti.<sup>35</sup> However, in the entry on Li Ti in *Anhui mingyuan shici zhenglue* 安徽名媛詩詞徵略 (A solicited collection of poetry by women from Anhui Province, 1936), the editor Guang Tiefu 光鐵夫 presents an interpretation that differs from Li Shangzhang's account of how the suicides happened:

Courtesy name Lixiang. Native of Shanghai, Jiangsu. Daughter of Songlin. Wife of Fang Chuanlie from Tongcheng. In her natal home, she developed a good rapport with Huang Xunying, a daughter of her mother's sister. Xunying's courtesy name is Xiang'ya. She was twelve years senior to [Anzi] and lived in Suzhou. [Xunying] was determined not to marry but to stay home taking care of her parents, but her mother

<sup>33</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 406.

<sup>34</sup> However, a poem by Li Ti indicates that she went to Suzhou with Huang in January and they stayed in Shizilin. It was still winter even in south China. See "In January of the Year Jichou [1829] I came to Wu with Sister Xiangya and Wrote a Letter to Uncle Huashi, Who was Sojourning in Hezhong" (己丑正月偕香崖姊至吳奉簡花史舅氏時客禾中) in *Qingfen ji*, 372.

<sup>35</sup> As cited from the modern reprint of *Qingfen ji*, such records appear in *Songjiang fu xuzhi* 松江府續志 published in 1884 and *Shanghai xian xuzhi* 上海縣續志 in 1918. See *Qingfen ji*, 1–2.

was not pleased about this. After Anzi was married, the couple had no conjugal love because the husband was not intelligent. She returned home and was reunited with Xunying in Suzhou. They sealed a suicide pact to drown themselves in a lake. The time when this happened was during the [Daoguang] Reign.<sup>36</sup> Anzi was 25 years old. She authored the Poetry Collection from the Tower of this Intorable Life, consisting of two *juan* of *shi* poems and one *juan* of *ci* poems (Source: Public Opinion).<sup>37</sup> 號吏香。江蘇上海人。松林女。桐城方傳烈室。在母家時與從母妹黃巽英善。巽英字香崖。長於安子十二歲。家居蘇州。立志侍親不嫁。然不得母歡。安子於歸後。以夫不慧。無伉儷情。歸與巽英會於蘇。相約投池死。時在嘉慶間。安子年二十五歲。著有猶得住樓詩二卷詞一卷 (民彙報)

In addition to the cited biographical note, Guang includes three song lyrics by Li Ti, two of which were written about Huang Xunying. Guang included Li Ti in his provincial anthology of Anhui women's poetry because of her marriage to a local man from Tongcheng. He makes a strong case sympathetic to the passion between the two women against the institutions of family and marriage. His biographical note emphasizes Li Ti's mismatched marriage ("the couple had no conjugal love because the husband was not intelligent"). The two poems Guang selected, on the contrary, express Li Ti's desire for the two women to be with each other in the strongest terms, such as *duo qing* ("rich in feelings") and *xiangsi* ("obsessed longing"). We do not know whether he had additional sources of information, but unlike Li Shangzhang, who suggests that Li Ti died after Huang, he notes that "they sealed a suicide pact to drown themselves in a lake" (相約投池死). Guang's record may not necessarily be more reliable than Li Shangzhang's, but the discrepancy concerning such a significant detail begs two related questions: Why did Li Ti and Huang Xunying commit suicide? Was it really a double suicide or not?

Importantly, a self-elegy written by Li Ti on behalf of both Huang and herself can be found in her poetry collections. It is written in the form of a song lyric to the tune, *Two Sharing One Heart* (*Liang tongxin* 兩同心), a fitting form to reflect the author's thematic concern, with the subtitle, "This is an elegy written for Sister Xiangya and myself while we are alive" (生輓香崖姊兼自輓). Whether this was actually written in the moment right before their suicides, this song can be read as an example of *jueming ci* (verse on cutting off/ending life), a culturally embedded genre of suicide inscription.<sup>38</sup> It is the most compelling evidence that their suicides were not impulsive, or passionate reactions to a minor incident:

We will die with the same heart,  
Although it is difficult to have the life that we wish.  
In the other world,  
We anticipate our sorrows will be buried.

<sup>36</sup>Guang's original dating was the Jiaqing Reign (1796–1820). It should be Daoguang Reign (1821–1850), since it happened in 1829.

<sup>37</sup>Guang, *Anhui mingyuan shici zhenglue*, 5.14–15. Guang gave his source for the story as *Minyan bao* 民彙報 (Public Opinion), a newspaper founded in Anqing in 1912. However, having searched the microfilmed copy of the newspaper held at the Anhui Library, I was unable to locate any relevant report in the newspaper.

<sup>38</sup>For a study of the genre's significance in Ming–Qing women's lives, see Grace Fong, "Signifying Bodies: The Cultural Significance of Suicide Writings by Women in Ming–Qing China," *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China* 3.1 (2001), 105–42. Another comparable genre is *sheng ji* 生祭, sacrificial lity for the living.



On this day, no need to shed tears.  
 One smashed the jade zither  
 To requite the other who understands its music.  
 How difficult to find each other?!  
 Hereby we are leaving to both plead with the god above  
 To honor the Orchid Pact we have sealed  
 And never separate us.  
 Whether in wind or rain our jointed souls  
 Will never be reborn in the land of oriel and flowers.  
 Pointing to the dusty world,  
 I scoffed: How many of you, gentlemen,  
 Still remember the vows you have made?  
 死有同心，生難如意。在他鄉，料定埋憂，到此日，何須流涕。碎瑤琴，以報知音，相逢容易。茲去共求上帝，類憐蘭契。永無分，風雨雙魂，休再墮鶯花大地。指塵寰，笑問多君，盟言可記？<sup>39</sup>

As the subtitle shows, this song is a final statement by Li Ti about the two women's lives. The reasons that compelled them to end their lives are twofold: 1) life had not turned out as they wished; and 2) death can convey them to a world that allows them to live together happily ever after. While the first points to their disappointment in life, the second shows their deep faith in the world after death or a future life.

The suicides of Huang and Li Ti might have been, as Li Shangzhang claims, triggered by the conflict between Huang and her mother, but Li Ti's writing reveals a constant and deeper distress that compelled Li Ti alone or together with Huang to premeditate death again and again. Some recurring thematic concerns show that she was deeply troubled by her gender and marriage. For example, in those "Six Poems Mourning Myself" written after she followed her husband to Tongcheng, she laments:

I'm too languid to face a mirror and wear a flower,  
 How pitiable that my body is not that of an extraordinary man!  
 If only I knew that writing would have no benefit for me!  
 I deeply regret that I have meticulously probed poetry and books.  
 慵折花枝對鏡簪，可憐身不作奇男  
 早知翰墨今無益，深悔詩書昔細探。<sup>40</sup>

Having realized that her gender was an obstacle for her to achieve what men could, she became cynical not only about her literary engagement but also the meaning of her life:

While I'm ashamed of being without Lady Xie's mind,  
 I dare to complain [that my husband is like] Mr. Wang between heaven and earth.  
 A life as drifting as willow catkin, what's the point to live it?  
 A body as light as a goose feather, no harm to kill it.  
 所愧襟懷非謝女，敢將天壤怨王郎  
 命如柳絮生何必，身似鴻毛死不妨。<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 293.

<sup>40</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 349.

<sup>41</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 349.

Unlike her brother's statement that "she accepts the suffering without expression of resentment" (順受無怨色), she is in fact expressing in this poem her bitterness about the mismatched marriage. By alluding to the story of Xie Daoyun 謝道韞 who disdained her husband Wang Ningzhi 王凝之 of the Jin (266–420), she echoed the boldest female voice that emerged from the Ming-Qing era.<sup>42</sup> Ironically, the willow catkin, which symbolizes female poetic talent because of Xie's famous line, is treated by Li Ti as the metaphor of her ill fate, a trigger for her suicidal ideation.

Li Shangzhang does not provide details about Huang's conflict with her mother. However, the clues from Li Ti's poems suggest that Huang's refusal to marry may have been a major issue. In the poem celebrating Huang's sworn celibacy, Li Ti mentions that either her own or Huang's mother did try to dissuade Huang from remaining unmarried. Although out of a claim for filiality, a woman's celibacy would not be uncontroversial, Huang's decision was not approved by her family. It also turned out that Huang devoted herself to Li Ti most of the time. From the time she joined the latter in August of 1828, she had constantly accompanied Li Ti until they died the next May. Both their families noticed the unusual attachment between the two. In addition to the brother's description that they were "inseparable as if glued together," Li Ti has a poetic line as well as an interlinear note, addressing her aunt, presumably the mother of Huang, "[Mother] at the North Hall, please don't laugh at us being fools in love [I mean Aunt Yunsheng]" (北堂莫笑情癡 [謂韻生姨母]).<sup>43</sup> As a younger cousin, Li Ti's attachment to Huang seems to have been very much accommodated by their families, but people around them such as her aunt, Huang's mother, did find some "foolishness" in these cousins' unusual bond. Although the messy details are missing from both Li Ti's and her brother's writings, the pressure was likely more than implicit in the urgings from their families, and no doubt the real reason for Li Ti's outcry that "it is difficult to have the life that we wish."

To end their oppressed or unfulfilled lives, Li Ti and Huang chose to die, but death for them was not a dead end, but a hope for rejoining each other in their next lives. It is evident from the religious terms Li Ti employed in her writing that she was deeply influenced both by Buddhism and other popular religions. She believed in an ultimate force that controlled the universe, including her destiny, which she calls *tian* (Heaven) or *shangdi* (the god above). She also believed in the next life, to which death is an entrance. All these beliefs prompted her and Huang's premeditation of suicide: "Hereby we are leaving to both plead with the god above / To honor the Orchid Pact we have sealed / And never separate us." This plea for Heaven's mercy to change their fate in the last statement echoes that "wild fancy" Li Ti held for them: "But let's wish to be a perfect couple in the next life. / A wild fancy it may be, / But who knows if Heaven won't have mercy?" To move the god by sacrificing their lives, their suicides were a quest for a better future that would enable them to transcend the restrictions on both women in general and their individual freedom.

Although Li Ti's brother shows a positive reception of Li Ti's deep bond with Huang in his writing, he was aware of the controversial nature of her suicide:

I, her brother Shangzhang, would say: while one's parents are alive, one should not die for one's friend. However, I would disagree with those who think my sister's

<sup>42</sup>See, for example, the discussion of Gu Zhenli's (1623–1699) poetic voice in Li Xiaorong, *Women's Poetry of Late Imperial China: Transforming the Inner Chambers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 105–7.

<sup>43</sup>*Qingfen ji*, 459.

death is as light as a goose feather. “A true man will die for one who appreciates him.” Yu Rang, Hou Ying, and the Five Hundred Men of Tianheng are cases in point. Didn’t they end their lives that way? If one were to examine her mind, one would find it selfless. However, she could not fulfill moral obligations for both her parent [mother] and others. In the year of Renwu (1822), my sister was seriously sick. Xiangya prayed to Heaven, willing to give up some years of her own life in order to save my sister’s. How could one’s life be shortened so that another’s be prolonged? However, this reflects the same heart they shared. My sister’s life had also been promised to Xiangya. One gave her life to the other, and the other paid it back with hers. Reflecting on what they did, we might say it almost falls into the categories of blind loyalty and foolish filial piety. However, her heart is indeed worth our sympathy. Those who would give a condemning look and throw stones toward [my sister and cousin] because of their way of death should feel ashamed for being inferior to women. Furthermore, shouldn’t the way of friendship be upheld rather than to let it be degraded?! Isn’t that the way it should be?<sup>44</sup>

弟尚璋曰：父母存，不許友以死。或尤姊之死為鴻毛，非也。士為知己者死，豫讓，侯嬴，田橫五百人，豈得已哉？原其心之不容己，孝與義遂不得兩全。壬午姊病革，香崖籲天，願減己壽增姊壽。夫年豈能減，亦豈能增？而一心之相印，姊固許之死矣。彼以死施，此以死報，跡其所為，近於愚忠愚孝者流，而其心大可哀已。有此死而世之反眼下石者，當愧出巾幗下。而友道維持不敝，其庶幾乎？

Their mothers were still alive when Li Ti and Huang committed suicide. Li Ti did attempt suicide in her husband’s home after she learnt about her father’s death, but eventually she took her life for Huang. For many, including her brother, she ignored her filial obligation but gave priority to her cousin. Whether anticipating a possible attack or responding to a real one, Li Shangzhang was conscious of the opinion that “his sister’s death is as light as a goose feather,” meaning that his sister took her life too lightly (*qing sheng* 輕生). The idiom *fanyan xiashi* 反眼下石 (literally, “to give a condemning look and throw a stone”), which he goes on to use, suggests that there could be even harsher reactions to how Li Ti and Huang died, which might have generated suspicions of their relationship as having been inappropriate.

While yielding to the principle that one should prioritize one’s responsibility to one’s parents, Li Shangzhang did find an angle from which to defend his sister, *youdao* 友道, the way of friends or simply friendship. Echoing his sister, he uses similar terms to recognize how this friendship was based on mutual attraction, appreciation, and understanding: *suqi* 夙契 (a pact carried forward from a former life), *tongxin* 同心 (sharing the same heart), and *zhiji* 知己 (one who knows the self). He then goes on to point out how this friendship had developed to its highest level, *si sheng jiao* 死生交 (the friendship of life and death). In this way, he attempted to illustrate how Li Ti’s suicide was actually motivated by moral concerns. That is why he mentioned how Huang at first vowed to give up some years of her own life to save Li Ti’s. That is also why he subtly yet significantly recounted their planned double suicide as a case of one following the other.

However, Li Shangzhang’s argument for friendship also reveals Li Ti and Huang’s transgression of gender boundaries. Friendship is among the “Five Bonds” as defined in Confucianism (ruler–minister, father–son, husband–wife, older–younger brothers, and friend–friend), but it was not applied to women, as they were confined to domestic and

<sup>44</sup> *Qingfen ji*, 406.

subordinate roles.<sup>45</sup> In order to illustrate Li Ti and Huang's mutual pledge to join each other in death, Li Shangzhang cites the famous saying, *Shi wei zhiji zhe si* 士為知己者死, in which *shi* originally refers to the male gender. Hence the translation is "a true man dies for one who appreciates him." In fact, there is a parallel line Li does not quote, "A woman adorns herself for one who is pleased by her" (*nü wei yueji zhe rong* 女為悅己者容). The two lines are often quoted together to specifically indicate the division between men's and women's roles. The historical predecessors Li cited, such as Yu Rang 豫讓 (d. 453 BCE), Hou Ying 侯嬴 (d. 257 BCE), and the Five Hundred Men (五百士) of Tianheng (田橫) (250–202 BCE), are all men whose heroic deeds belong to the male-dominated political world.<sup>46</sup> By exemplifying a friendship of life and death in the domestic world, Li Ti and Huang challenged the institution and ideology of the patriarchal family that only accommodated women as wives, mothers, and daughters. However strong his argument is, Li Ti's brother cannot explain away the controversial nature of their deep bond and double suicide.

## Conclusions

Rather than label their relationship as a lesbian one, I propose describe the extraordinary bond formed between Li Ti and Huang using the concept of queerness as a way of viewing their active resistance to the sexual or gender norms of their time and even their way of diverging from contemporary critical terms such as homosocial or homosexual. The surviving writings about Li Ti and Huang do not show that they were part of a female community. They show no connections with women outside kinship. Although Li Ti's poems demonstrate a continuum from kinship to friendship and to passionate feelings for Huang, no obvious homoeroticism can be seen in her writing. Queer is a better term because it "maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal."<sup>47</sup> To call them queer is not anachronistic. Rather, we are doing them "a new kind of justice" in Eve Sedgwick's sense to recognize their resistance to the normative roles assigned to women by their society as well as the institution of heterosexual marriage.<sup>48</sup> No matter how we should define their relationship in modern terms, they represented the most important effective bond in each other's life, a part they call *zhiyin*/understanding friend, *wangxing you*/soulmate, *lanqi*/sworn sister, or even *jia'ou*/a match made in heaven, as illustrated in my reading of the poems.

Li Ti's bond with Huang transgressed the gender roles and structure as defined by the Confucian patriarchy. In studying female friendship, Maram Epstein has aptly pointed out that "friendships among women were inherently subversive since they endow daughters/sisters/wives/mothers with an independent sense of personhood outside the control of the patriarchal family."<sup>49</sup> Because of the Confucian system of sex segregation,

<sup>45</sup>For major studies of friendship, see Anna Shields, *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Martin Huang, "Male Friendship in Ming China: An Introduction," in *Male Friendship in Ming China* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 2–33; and Wai-ye Li, ed., *Gender and Friendship in Chinese Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2024).

<sup>46</sup>For records of these men, see respectively *Shi ji* 史記 (Shanghai: Wuzhou tongwenju, 1903), 86.4a–6a; 74.2a–5a; and 94.4b–6a. Available through <https://ctext.org/library.pl>.

<sup>47</sup>Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 99.

<sup>48</sup>Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 99.

<sup>49</sup>Maram Epstein, "Laying Claim to an Autonomous Self: Women's Friendships in the Nineteenth-century *tanci* Novel *Mengying yuan*," in *Gender and Friendship in Chinese Literature*, edited by Wai-ye Li (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 89–115.

female bonding within the inner quarters was common and generally acceptable. However, the unbreakable union between Li and Huang subverted the existing social structure and gender ideology. They resisted the institution of marriage in their strategic ways and developed an exclusive relationship that they defined as akin to an ideal marriage. The recurrence of their pledge, whether in terms of *meng* 盟 (vow) or *qi* 契 (pact), in Li Ti's poems indicates that the two women continuously enhanced their bond with moral commitment and spiritual connection, a bond by all means transcended kinship and other normative roles prescribed to women.

The interlinear notes referencing Huang that Li Ti inserted in her poems are worth our special attention. What do they signify? As the author of these poems, she knew what the lines mean. As her *zhiyin*, the understanding audience, Huang may not have needed this reference either. I argue that this is for an audience outside the two women, even a future audience like us. Li Ti was not only a self-reflexive poet but also an editor of her own poetry.<sup>50</sup> It is evident that she was trying to transmit her writing to an audience outside her confined circle and to posterity. As the few examples cited earlier in this article show, all the referenced lines are expressions of love and desire for two individuals to be together. Hence Li Ti's meticulous notes were intended to indicate her unambiguous relationship with and feelings for Huang.

Even more subversive about the Li-Huang bond was their choice of suicide. Their double suicide and the expressed love between the two women provide a striking contrast with those female martyrs who died for patriarchal values such as chastity defined toward their [male] husbands. Women took their own lives for various reasons, but those who died for moral claims tended to be recorded in official histories. China holds stunning written records of heroic female suicides, whether during times of political chaos or peace. While sacrificing one's life out of loyalty to the country was a male commitment, chastity or the integrity of the female body was by default the moral purpose for female suicide, although their sacrifice could be extended to their dynasty during a time of rebellion or foreign invasion. However, because of the increasing popularity of widow suicide, it became a serious concern in the Qing's imperial discourse and state policy. More than one Qing emperor issued edicts to discourage women from taking life lightly, even those who sincerely intended to embody traditional female virtue.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, they would disapprove of Li's and Huang's suicides.

Furthermore, by way of suicide, Li Ti and Huang presented a rare case of social protest and the individual quest for freedom. To my knowledge, our historical investigations of female suicide found no other cases that demonstrate such meaning and significance, except for a few examples from Ming-Qing fiction that can be viewed as "for justice, freedom, and independence."<sup>52</sup> In examining a few cases in which historically credible women left behind poems before suicide, when their body or reputation were endangered, Grace Fong has illustrated their act of suicide as "an act of agency" and the "verse on ending life" as an embodiment of the author's immortality.<sup>53</sup> However, as Fong also points out, these cases are not unproblematic in two senses: first, all the cases were somehow mediated by male literati even if they did not

<sup>50</sup>For her brother Li Shangzhang's mention of Li Ti's editing her own poetry collections, see *Qingfen ji*, 406.

<sup>51</sup>Janet Theiss, "Managing Martyrdom: Female Suicide and Statecraft in Mid-Qing China," *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China* 3.1 (2001), 47–76.

<sup>52</sup>Paola Zamperini, "Untamed Hearts: Eros and Suicide in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction," *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China* 3.1 (2001), 77–104.

<sup>53</sup>Fong, "Signifying Bodies," 140.

produce some of the women's self-narratives. Second, what these suicidal women embodied was "the ideology that subordinated women."<sup>54</sup> Although Li Ti's brother Li Shangzhang also involved himself in commemorating Li Ti, possibly editing her poetry collections and defending her controversial suicide, Li Ti's sizable collections preserved together with the writings by other family members as well as the rich details about her life and bond with Huang are too solid to be fabricated and they are internally consistent. And Li Shangzhang could not possibly have a motivation to do so. His efforts, as we see in his defense of Li Ti, were on the contrary to mitigate its controversial nature. The self-elegy written by Li Ti on behalf of Huang and herself functioned as their Ending-Life Verse, spelling out the fact that their suicidal intention was to transcend societal restrictions and proceed to a better future in which they could pursue their desires and ambitions.

In addition, Li Ti's self-representation and self-expression in other poems enable us to more fully and deeply understand that her struggles were against the conventional meaning of life as a woman: "Why bother to let me be born into the inner quarters?! / I have an ambition but no way to fulfill it" (何苦生於閨閣內, 有志難伸).<sup>55</sup> These lines, among others, often surface from the corpus of her poetry collections, voicing her frustrations over a social system that was oppressive towards women. Li Ti obtained a literary education at a very young age, and her talent was recognized at least in the small social circle around her family, but her literary achievement landed her nowhere but in a miserable marriage. She was not alone in voicing complaints about marriage and gender inequality; this had become a distinctive yet recurring theme in Ming-Qing women's poetry.<sup>56</sup> Gu Zhenli of the early Qing, for example, had openly attacked gender conventions with her idiosyncratic approach, and she might even have been a source of inspiration for the well-read Li Ti. However, Li stands as a unique tragedy: her sorrow over gender restrictions culminated in her suicide.

Li Ti appears to have been depressed and suicidal, both in her self-representation and in her brother's narrative. The association of female talent with delicate health and even death, viewing literary talent as a curse on the female gender, was a popular cultural belief in late imperial China. In fact, Li Ti noted that her father discouraged her from pursuing poetic composition for the sake of her health.<sup>57</sup> Although modern scholars can demystify the phenomenon with a sociological analysis of the Confucian social structure and gender ideology that did not favor women's talent outside the domestic sphere, the irony is that literary education was indeed a source of depression for women like Li Ti as it led to a realization of their limited place in society. In Li Ti's case, her depression and suicide were caused by her awareness of the social injustice imposed on her gender.

Li Ti and Huang Xunying ended their lives in the hopes that death could enable them to surpass their social restrictions. Li Ti's and Huang's double suicide reminds us of tragic stories in which only death can unify a couple in love, not only that of Liang Shanbo 梁山伯 and Zhu Yingtai 祝英台, the famous heterosexual lovers who transformed into butterflies, but also that of Pan Wenzhi 潘文子 and Wang Zhongxian 王仲先, a male homosexual couple who, when faced with a social impasse, dug their own tombs to be

<sup>54</sup>Fong, "Signifying Bodies," 142.

<sup>55</sup>*Qingfen ji*, 389.

<sup>56</sup>For other examples, see Li Xiaorong, "Engendering Heroism: Ming-Qing Women's Song Lyrics to the Tune Man Jiang Hong," *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China* 7.1 (2005), 1-39.

<sup>57</sup>*Qingfen ji*, 405.

buried together.<sup>58</sup> More relevant to Li and Huang is the latter case. It was the social impasse similar to the one that facing the same-sex couple Pan and Wang that led Li and Huang to end their lives. In reacting to the restrictions imposed by families and society, they determined that death would be the best avenue for fulfilling their transgressive desires.

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<sup>58</sup>For the story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai and its various versions, see Wilt Idema, trans., *The Butterfly Lovers: The Legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai: Four Versions with Related Texts* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010). For the story of Pan Wenzhi and Wang Zhongxian, see Lang Xian 浪仙, “Pan Wenzhi qihe yuanyang zhong” 潘文子契合鴛鴦塚, in *Shi diantou* 石點頭 (Ming), available at <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=233093>.

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