Master thesis

Wang Yun's *Fanhua meng*: a call for changing gender roles?

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of gender in Wang Yun's play *Fanhua meng*. Wang Yun (c.1750-1819) wrote three plays, of which *Fanhua meng* is the most famous. *Fanhua meng* tells the story of a woman, Wang Menglin, who is so unhappy about being female that one day she has a dream in which she is a man. In this dream she lives her life as a man to the fullest, with a great career and beautiful women. Upon awaking from this dream she is deeply unhappy until a Daoist immortal guides her to enlightenment.

The play has long been regarded as her call for equal rights for women. This view was primarily based on two poems from the play that were extant, but now that the entire play has been found, it is time to re-examine that view. In this paper I demonstrate that although Wang Yun was unhappy about being a woman, she did not advocate equal rights for women, nor did she try to change the existing gender roles. When closely examining the usage of gender throughout the play, it becomes clear that Wang Menglin is not simply a woman whose body transforms. Although she has the body of a woman at the start and end of the play, she may identify herself as male throughout the play, making her a heterosexual man instead of a (possibly lesbian) woman. In the end, the message Wang Yun seems to give to other women is to accept themselves the way they are or to use religion to escape a typical woman's life and learn contentment.

Introduction

With the growth of both Women and Gender Studies, more attention is being paid to women in Chinese history. Until relatively recent, most foreign scholars were not aware of the vast amount of women writings that have been passed down and survive to this day. The reprint of Hu Wenkai's book about women's writings in 1985 instigated the beginning of the study of women's writings from the past by foreign scholars.[1] Although not studied as much as other women related topics, this field has seen considerable developments in the last few decades, with increasing attention being paid to the writings of women themselves. In this way women can represent themselves in history and this helps us to gain a better understanding of the lives they led. This has also contributed to the recent development in which historians have moved

[1] Mann, Susan (1997): 4.

away from the idea that women in premodern China were merely passive victims of the Confucian feudal tradition.[2]

One female writer who wrote during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) is Wang Yun 王筠. This female poet and playwright wrote three plays and a collection of over 200 poems during her lifetime. One of her plays, *Fanhua meng* 繁华梦 (A Dream of Glory), tells the story of a woman who has a dream in which she becomes a man and lives a full and glorious life as such. From the time of publication until now it owes its fame to its dealing with gender relations and feminist expressions.

The play was assumed to be lost for a long time and only studied through quotations and comments about it that were passed down through the writings of others. Several scholars, such as Paul Ropp[3], have written articles about Wang Yun and her play based on these few remaining passages. However, Qingyun Wu found a complete version of the play in the National Library in China and published it together with an English translation in 2008. Although the full version of the play is now available, it is yet to be thoroughly studied as most papers dealing with *Fanhua meng* are older papers that are not based on the newly discovered full version.

Many scholars believe Wang Yun used *Fanhua meng* to express her desire for gender equality and that she is an advocate for equal rights and opportunities for women. However, this has mostly been based on only two poems. Therefore in this paper I examine if this idea about Wang Yun still holds when examining the entire play. Also more generally the complete version of the play has not been studied in-depth. For that reason, I analyse the role of gender in the complete version of *Fanhua meng* and its implications. I first begin by discussing women's lives during Wang Yun's lifetime and what we know about Wang Yun and her works. I then address *Fanhua meng*'s reputation as a feminist play and explore whether this view still holds in light of the newly discovered full version of the play. Lastly, I analyse the usage of gender and sexuality in *Fanhua meng* from a Gender Studies perspective and examine what implications this has for our understanding of the play.

[2] Ropp, Paul S. (1994): 348.
[3] Ropp, Paul S. (1990) and (1993).

1. Women writers during the High Qing

In this chapter I give an outline of the lives of women writers during Wang Yun's lifetime and developments and influences on them that are specific for this time. This may give us some insight in what Wang Yun's life and her world may have been like. In this paper I make use of the term the High Qing (1683-1839) as a time period to discuss the time in which Wang Yun lived. However, many trends during the High Qing had already started much earlier. As Susan Mann demonstrates in her book, there was no major rupture between the end of the Ming and beginning of the Qing dynasty in women's lives, which mostly took place in the inner chambers. Many of the changes and developments regarding women occurred over the span of the seventeenth century and trends starting in the Ming continued after the Manchu conquest. This is not to say that Qing rule did not affect women at all, but it did not disrupt the tradition of women's learning that was already established.[4] Another important point is that most research on women during the High Qing is based primarily on evidence from the Jiangnan area, where the majority of women writers lived during this time period.[5] Therefore, certain circumstances may have been different for Wang Yun who lived in Chang'an.

1.1 Qing rule and its influence on women's lives

The High Qing has often been perceived by scholars as a time of prosperity. With dramatic population growth and major changes occurring in the economy, there was a lot of geographical and social mobility and all of these developments influenced gender relations. Because of all these changes, the state sought more direct intervention in people's lives, which in turn influenced gender perceptions and roles.[6]

Many writings of women from this time are extant. The clear presence of female writers at this time provoked debates about women's proper roles. Many of these debates were sparked by the revival in the study of classical texts, which stressed the fact that there were many educated women in the past. These were examples of women who were culturally refined and did great things through their writings and were thus used to legitimize women's education and literary pursuits.[7] This empowered women, but only within a moralistic framework. Because it was considered to be important that women were virtuous wives, many

[4] Mann, Susan (1997): 7.
[5] Fong, Grace S. (2008): 2.
[6] Mann, Susan (1997): 20.
[7] Mann, Susan (1997): 20-31.

instruction books for women were printed during the High Qing to advise women on how to manage the family in a proper and orderly way. Education was not only useful for improving the household management; learned women could also help and give advice to their husbands, and through this even indirectly influence the government.[8] The Manchu state contributed to the focus on women as moral wives and virtuous daughters by promoting family values and female chastity.[9]

However, the Qing government's influence on both women and men notwithstanding, there was also room for other developments. Paul Ropp has noted that in the mid and late Qing several male writers began developing feminist ideas, sparking additional debates about the place of widows, footbinding and concubinage.[10] However, the impact of these new ideas notwithstanding, none of these male writers advocated full gender equality and they always assumed women would remain dependent on men.[11]

1.2 Writing women's lives

From childhood the boundary between men and women was clear and strictly maintained. At every stage in life, boys and girls were educated according to their appropriate gender roles.[12] From around the age of seven, education for girls would start, often separate from their brothers. Girls were often educated by their fathers, or if they were absent, by their mothers, female relatives or a governess.[13] For elite daughters, there was no real alternative to marriage and all girls knew they would have to marry at some point.[14] Educated women would often hope for a companionate marriage, where they would be as well-educated as their husbands and share intellectual conversations.[15] However, marriages were a family affair, planned by parents with a matchmaker. Parents would try to make a good match for their daughters with a family of similar social status, but this did not always end well. Unhappy marriages were usual and a reoccurring theme in women's writings.[16]

Because women did not have any purpose for their writing, they were more free in what they could to write about and this allows a fascinating insight into their ideas. However,

[8] Mann, Susan (1997): 29, 78.
[9] Mann, Susan (1997): 21-27.
[10] Ropp, Paul S. (1976): 11-23.
[11] Ropp, Paul S. (1981): 151.
[12] Fong, Grace S. (2008): 35.
[13] Mann, Susan (1997): 55-57.
[14] Mann, Susan (1997): 54.
[15] Widmer, Ellen (1997): 2.
[16] Mann, Susan (1997): 10-13.

whenever a woman wrote, she would be evaluated, possibly praised or criticized, and therefore she was not completely free and possibly influenced in her writing.[17] Women were expected to develop their virtue through writing and education, but at the same time, they were expected to devote their time to managing the household, so using time to write would need justification.[18]

Regardless of possible scrutiny by men, education gave Qing women the chance to criticize the world in which they lived and to create their own identity and represent themselves. Although before the Qing dynasty writing already empowered women, during the Qing this would go even further with women even acting as literary critics, publishers and anthologists. Their writing empowered them and they were aware of their skills and talents. However, many women complained about how their talent was wasted. Education was considered to be important, but women were expected to only use their knowledge and skills in the context of the household.[19] Nevertheless, not all women grieved their wasted talent. Some were proud of their role as the manager of the family and keeper of the family's morality, and therefore these women did not question the existing gender roles.[20]

2. Wang Yun

2.1 Her upbringing

Wang Yun, also known by the sobriquet Song Ping 松坪 and as the Woman Historian of the Green Window 绿窗女士, was a female writer from Chang'an.[21] Her year of birth is uncertain, but it is estimated that she was born around 1750. This estimate is based on the fact that her play *Fanhua meng* was finished in 1768. The main character of *Fanhua meng* is around sixteen years old and it is believed that she is a personification of Wang Yun herself, making it likely that Wang Yun was around that age at the time of writing.[22] Her father Wang Yuanchang 王元常, received his *jinshi* 进士 degree in 1748 and then served as a county magistrate in Wuyi and Yongqing.[23] From a young age, Wang Yun learned to read and write

[17] Mann, Susan (1997): 16-17.
[18] Mann, Susan (1997): 77.
[19] Mann, Susan (1997): 17-18, 98-99.
[20] Ko, Dorothy (1992): 14.
[21] Wang Yongkuan 王永宽 (1981): 109.
[22] Wang Yongkuan 王永宽 (1981): 112.
[23] Wang Yongkuan 王永宽 (1981): 109.

and became a distinguished writer in her own right. From what we know about her, her youth seems comparable to the general sketch of women's upbringing as outlined in chapter one. She came from a privileged, scholarly family that supported her education and literary pursuits. Even after marriage it appears that she maintained regular contact with her natal family.

2.2 Her marriage

We do not know much about Wang Yun's marriage and we do not even know her husband's name. He is never mentioned by Wang Yun, nor by any of her contemporaries who wrote about her and her works.[24] The scholars Zhou Miaozhong and Wang Yongzheng claim that her husband was a poor scholar from her native place and that he died shortly after they married, leaving Wang Yun to raise her son by herself.[25] However, Deng Dan has opposed this idea, claiming that her husband was still alive when their son took his imperial exams and thus did not die early into their marriage. When their son Wang Bailing passed the examinations and worked at the Hanlin academy, he wrote a poem to his parents to apologize for still not being able to return home. This poem has been preserved in the anthology *Xiyuan banxiangji* 西园瓣香集. In this poem Wang Bailing refers several times to his parents or *er qin/shuang qin* 二亲/双亲 and not to one parent, which makes it likely that both his parents were still alive at this time.[26] Paul Ropp mentions that Wang Yun does not occur in the lists of chaste widows in the *Shaanxi Provincial Gazetteer*, making it unlikely she became a widow at an early age, as remarriage was not common among gentry families.[27]

If her husband was indeed alive for all this time, they would have lived together for at least thirty-six years.[28] This makes it rather strange that in all her poems she does not mention him once, especially since she mentions many other family members and family affairs. This has led some scholars to suggest that she may have had an unhappy marriage. In several of her poems she expresses feelings of unhappiness and grief which could support this theory.[29] Paul Ropp has suggested that Wang Yun's family may have had to accept a husband who was not as talented as Wang Yun herself, only increasing her bitterness about her own fate and her

[24] Deng Dan 邓丹 (2007): 72.
[25] Deng Dan 邓丹 (2007): 72-73.
[26] Deng Dan 邓丹 (2007): 72-73.
[27] Ropp, Paul S. (1990): 100.
[28] Deng Dan 邓丹 (2007): 73.
[29] Deng Dan 邓丹 (2007): 73-74.

unhappiness.[30] It will probably forever remain unknown whether or not Wang Yun had an unhappy marriage, but considering the many unhappy marriages in her time, this does not seem improbable.

2.3 Her son

In 1770 Wang Yun gave birth to her son Wang Bailing 王百龄. She placed all her hopes and ambitions on him, even telling him that the family would suffer poverty in order for him to gain his *jinshi* 进士 degree.[31] She forced him to study hard and take part in the imperial examinations several times.[32] Upon hearing that in 1802 he had finally received his *jinshi* degree, Wang Yun wrote a most cheerful poem to celebrate the occasion, mentioning how after suffering hardships for thirty years, they had now been compensated.[33] She even seems to have forgotten her bitterness towards her own fate and seemed to have a new faith in Heaven, as the last line of her poem is: "Now we see the infallible judgement of Heaven's Way."[34] After serving as an official in the Hanlin academy, Wang Bailing became a department magistrate in 1809 and Wang Yun lived with him and relied on him from that moment onwards.[35] In her son's biography, Wang Yun, who died in 1819, was commemorated as being a learned woman who studied all her life.[36]

3. Her writings

3.1 Her works

In the course of her life Wang Yun wrote three plays, *Fanhua meng* 繁华梦, *Quanfuji* 全福记 and *Youxian meng* 游仙梦, of which only the first two are still extant today.[37] Many of her poems have survived in two anthologies: *Xiyuan banxiangji* 西园瓣香集, her father's collected works, also including poems by Wang Yun and her son; and *Zhongguo gudai*

[30] Ropp, Paul S. (1990): 89.
[31] Wang Yongkuan 王永宽 (1981): 111.
[32] Deng Dan 邓丹 (2007): 73.
[33] Ropp, Paul S. (1990): 103.
[34] Ropp, Paul S. (1990): 103.
[35] Wang Yongkuan 王永宽 (1981): 111.
[36] Wang Yongkuan 王永宽 (1981): 112.
[37] Deng Dan 邓丹 (2007): 71.

xiqujia pingzhuan 中国古代戏曲家评传.[38] In addition, a biography of and poems by Wang Yun, her father and her son have been preserved in the *Shaanxi Provincial Gazetteer*, the *Shaanxi tongzhi xu tongzhi*.[39] It is also said that her collected works were printed under the title *Huaiqingtang ji* 槐庆堂集, but to my knowledge this collection has not survived.[40]

Many scholars have written about Wang Yun and her work. However, most of them did so without reading her actual works or even knowing they had survived, and therefore based their analysis on pieces of her writings that have come down through the writings of others. For example, Paul Ropp based his article about Wang Yun on poems by her from the *Shaanxi Provincial Gazetteer*. He notes that "Wang Yun's surviving writings are sparse"[41] and when discussing *Fanhua meng*, he states "Unfortunately, this opera seems to have been lost."[42] To my knowledge, Hu Wenkai was the first one to claim its survival, noting in his 1957 work in a short paragraph about Wang Yun and her works that *Fanhua meng* exists (存), while of her two other plays he states he has not yet seen them (未见), which might imply they had not been found yet.[43] However, neither he nor any other twentieth-century scholar dealing with Wang Yun claim to have seen *Fanhua meng* or any of the other works themselves nor do they give any details about the works that might indicate they had read them.[44] Now some of her writings have been rediscovered in libraries and two of her works have become more readily available, as both *Fanhuameng* and *Quanfuji* have been published in Hua Wei's *Mingqing funü xiquji*.[45] In addition, Qingyun Wu has translated *Fanhuameng* into English and published the translation together with the original Chinese text, which is my main source for the play itself.[46]

3.2 Fanhua meng

Fanhua meng is by far Wang Yun's most famous work and the reason for her fame. The play begins with a scene in which the talented and educated female protagonist, Wang Menglin, is sitting in her boudoir, bored and frustrated by the fact that she is unable to pursue a career.

[38] Deng Dan 邓丹 (2007): 72.
[39] Ropp, Paul S. (1990): 88.
[40] Ropp, Paul S. (1990): 94.
[41] Ropp, Paul S. (1990): 88.
[42] Ropp, Paul S. (1990): 89.
[43] Hu Wenkai 胡文楷 (1957): 194.
[44] Ropp, Paul S. (1990): 106.
[45] Hua Wei 华玮 (2003).
[46] Wu, Qingyun (2008).

When she looks at a scroll of a beautiful woman, she longs to meet her and thinks of the two beauties Lady Huang and Lady Hu that she met a year earlier and has not seen since. She then falls asleep and Shancai, the servant of Bodhisattva Guanyin, comes onto the stage and changes Wang Menglin into a man. Upon waking up, Wang Menglin is extremely happy with her new body and embraces life as a man. Wang Menglin devotes himself to studying for the examinations, but after gaining first place in the Autumn Examinations, he travels to Hangzhou and Suzhou in search of beautiful women and becomes engaged to Lady Huang and Lady Hu. When he returns home, his mother has already arranged his engagement to the beauty from the scroll, Lady Xie, who is to become his wife. When Wang Menglin wins first place in the Spring examinations, he marries Lady Xie. Although Lady Xie is initially jealous when she discovers that he is also engaged to two other girls, she eventually allows him to keep the concubines and they all live together in harmony. One day Wang Menglin wakes up and it turns out that her twenty years as a man were nothing but a dream. She feels depressed and wishes to go back to the dream world. Then the immortal Magu comes down to show her how to free herself from worries and become an immortal. Wang Menglin finally seems to understand that longing for the dream world is not the solution and says she will devote herself to becoming an immortal like Magu.

The play is thought to disclose Wang Yun's real thoughts, with the protagonist, Wang Menglin, being her alter ego. Deng Dan claims that many of the other characters in the play are based on people Wang Yun knew in real life, such as family members and maids.[47] As mentioned earlier, it is estimated that Wang Yun wrote *Fanhua meng* in her late teens, likely prior to or shortly after getting married.[48] This has led scholars to suggest that *Fanhua meng* reveals Wang Yun's thoughts before marriage and how her ideas changed after marriage.[49]

When she finished her play in 1768, she gave it to her father for comments. Her father edited the text and then put it away for ten years, until 1778 when he gave the script to Zhang Fengsun to review. He in turn gave it to his sister Zhang Zao, a female writer herself, who praised *Fanhua meng*. Her brother Zhang Fengsun subsequently subsidized its publishing.[50] As during this time writings by women were usually published by their families,[51] it is interesting that in this case it was not paid for by Wang Yun's family.

[47] Deng Dan 邓丹 (2007): 76.
[48] Mao Jie 毛劼 (2014): 180.
[49] Deng Dan 邓丹 (2007): 53; Mao Jie 毛劼 (2014): 180.
[50] Chen Guohua 陈国华 (2010): 18.
[51] Widmer, Ellen (1997): 3.

The famous calligrapher Liang Guozhi 梁国治 later praised Wang Yun's originality in both *Fanhua meng* and *Quanfuji*.[52] However, not everyone was so enthusiastic about *Fanhua meng*. When Wang Yun's father visited his friend Zhu Gui 朱珪 and showed him the play, Zhu Gui commented that although the play was good, it gives the reader a lonely and sad feeling afterwards[53] ("曲则佳矣，但全剧过于冷寂，使读者悄然而悲泣"[54]). After he disclosed this to Wang Yun, she reportedly decided to write *Quanfuji* as a way of showing that she was also capable of writing a more cheerful play. She finished *Quanfuji* four years after the publication of *Fanhua meng*[55] and this play received positive comments from Zhu Gui and even his financial support in getting it published.[56]

4. Wang Yun as an advocate for equal rights

4.1 Her reputation

In writing the play, Wang Yun breaks with convention by letting her female lead, Wang Menglin, come on to the stage first, while it was usual for the male lead to come onto the stage first.[57] This was also noticed by her contemporaries, with the famous playwright Jiao Xun 焦循 noting that by allowing the female lead to come on stage first and the male lead second, she changed the precedent ("以女人王氏登场，生于二出始出，变例也."[58]) Yin Wei suggests that this shows that Wang Yun is pursuing gender equality,[59] while Tan Zhengbi has suggested that this indicates that she deeply loathes men.[60]

Other scholars have also interpreted the play as Wang Yun's expression of feminist ideas on gender equality. According to Wang Yongkuan Wang Yun wants to pursue equal rights for women and the right to pursue a career. He argues that writing *Fanhua meng* is her way of protesting against heaven and feudal society for the injustice that has been done to her. At the same time he claims she does not oppose feudal society itself and does not understand

[52] Deng Dan 邓丹 (2007): 77.
[53] Chen Guohua 陈国华 (2010): 18.
[54] Chen Guohua 陈国华 (2010): 18.
[55] Wang Yongkuan 王永宽 (1981): 110.
[56] Chen Guohua 陈国华 (2010): 18.
[57] Yin Wei 殷伟 (1991): 31-32.
[58] Yin Wei 殷伟 (1991): 31-32.
[59] Yin Wei 殷伟 (1991): 32.
[60] Tan Zhengbi 谭正璧 (2001): 332.

the roots of women's inequality and therefore does not know how to liberate them.[61] Paul Ropp also mentions her reputation as an "advocate for greater opportunities for women".[62] This reputation and her fame is mainly based on two *ci* poems from *Fanhua meng* that survived not only in the play itself, but in other works as well. The first of these two poems is set at the beginning of scene two, when the still female Wang Menglin is bored in her boudoir and says:

Buried deep in the boudoir for a dozen years,
I can be neither an official nor an immortal.
Even reading rouses my admiration for Ban Chao;
Holding a wine cup, I chant the poems of Li Bai.

In spite of my soaring ambition,
I am not fated to be a Mulan or a Chonggu.
Since I have not shared in the Jade Court of the Golden Steed,
I can only pour my fantasies into a dream.[63]

闺阁沉埋十数年，
不能身贵不能仙。
读书每羡班超志，
把酒长吟李白篇。

怀壮气，欲冲天，
木兰崇嘏事无缘。
玉堂金马生无分，
好把心情付梦诠。[64]

In this poem, Wang Menglin laments her fate as a woman. She indicates that it is her ambition to be as great as the Han-dynasty general Ban Chao and the poet Li Bai.[65] Although

[61] Wang Yongkuan 王永宽 (1981): 110-111.
[62] Ropp, Paul S. (1990): 91.
[63] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 53.
[64] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 216.
[65] Su Zhecong 苏者聪 (1987): 451.

some women like Hua Mulan, who went to war in her father's place, or Huang Chonggu, who disguised as a man won first place in the examinations, managed to escape the inner chambers, Wang Menglin suggests that that will not be her fate. She will not take part in the examinations nor make it to the Hanlin Academy and can only dream about such things.

Her second famous *ci* poem takes place in scene 25, when Wang Menglin is depressed about having awoken from her dream. This poem has been translated into English by both Paul Ropp and Qingyun Wu. Although both of their translations convey the same message, their translations differ greatly at certain points. This seems to be because they use Chinese versions that have punctuation marks at different places. Where Paul Ropp uses Su Zhecong's Chinese version of the poem, Qingyun Wu has placed punctuation marks at completely different places in the Chinese version in her book. I quote Paul Ropp's translation below, but at points where Qingyun Wu's translation is considerably different, I will also later mention hers.

I scratch my head, call to Heaven;
My call gets no reply
But a vast vast empty space.
I deplore the reversal
Whereby the creator
Gives birth to imperfections on purpose.
The rouged beauties drift, bear regrets past and present,
Those with talent grow old, mad for a thousand autumns.
I ask heaven and earth
Who will sharpen the sword of my heart
To cut through this distress?

Assess ten thousand affairs;
Judge things impartially;
Be content with your fate;
So the wise folk all say.
But pity too Pan Yueh in Heyang turning grey
And Shen Yue growing weary (men also work and fail).

Yellow Millet Dream conjures wealth in vain;

Bad writing takes the prize by Heaven ordained.
I wipe my tears on my plain sleeve,
To no avail write every day in pain,
And deeply grieve … without leave.[66]

搔首呼天，呼不应茫茫一片。嗟颠倒弄权造化，故生缺陷。红粉飘零今古恨，才人老大千秋怨。问乾坤，心剑倩谁磨，挥愁断。论万事，从公判：安时命，达人见。叹河阳鬓改，隐侯腰倦。孽梦徒尝人造福，痴文妄夺天成案。揾青衫，咄咄日书空，沉吟遍。[67]

In this poem Wang Menglin asks heaven why it creates imperfections. Paul Ropp has offered two possible meanings for the word imperfections here. One possible interpretation is that this refers to the imperfections of women in general, but Ropp mentions that he considers it more likely to mean the "imperfect fit of a woman whose ambition and talent exceeds that of most men while she is constrained to the minor social, cultural, and intellectual status of a woman."[68] This seems the more likely meaning here, because Wang Yun does not seem to have a problem with the status and gender roles of women per se. She merely seems bothered by the fact that she herself is limited in what she can do while she has the talent and skills to achieve much more.

The sentences "The rouged beauties drift, bear regrets past and present, // Those with talent grow old, mad for a thousand autumns." have been translated by Qingyun Wu as "Can't you explain the deep-rooted resentment of a woman, // Whose fate has been scattered like Pink Powder? // Can't you appreciate the sorrows of talented ladies through the centuries?"[69] While both of these translations convey the same feeling of resentment, Paul Ropp's translation makes women in general the subject of the sentence, lamenting their fate, while Qingyun Wu seems to focus more on Wang Menglin expressing her own frustration with her specific circumstances.

Wang Yun appears to be sarcastic when saying "Be content with your fate; // So the wise folk all say."[70] as she is clearly not content with her fate. She is aware that there are men who suffer from unrecognized talent as well and who are not content with their fate. Qingyun

[66] Ropp, Paul S. (1993): 126-127.
[67] Su Zhecong 苏者聪 (1987): 451-452.
[68] Ropp, Paul S. (1993): 126.
[69] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 177.
[70] Ropp, Paul S. (1993): 127.

Wu has translated this sentence as "Wise people should be contented with their destiny."[71] However, considering the context of the play, I feel Paul Ropp's translation is more appropriate here, as it seems unlikely Wang Yun was content with her life or thought others should be content with their lives if their talent was not recognized.

The last verse has been translated completely different by Paul Ropp and Qingyun Wu so therefore I will quote them both in full here.

> How could a perverted dream ever bring happiness to a person!
> How could a book of madness ever reverse the verdict set by heaven?
> Pondering and pondering,
> I finally tear at my gown and curse the vanity in my fantasy.[72]

> Yellow Millet Dream conjures wealth in vain;
> Bad writing takes the prize by Heaven ordained.
> I wipe my tears on my plain sleeve,
> To no avail write every day in pain,
> And deeply grieve… without leave.[73]

Although both of these translations would make sense in the context of *Fanhua meng*, by not including the reference to the story *Yellow Millet Dream* Qingyun Wu omits an important comparison with another dream story. Many works have been written, by men and women, using a dream as a literary device and Wang Yun likely read some of these and may have used them as inspiration for her own work. Therefore, I think it is important to include this reference to the *Yellow Millet Dream* here. Furthermore, Paul Ropp's translation here seems somewhat closer to the Chinese version so therefore I have chosen to quote his translation above. From this version we can see that Wang Menglin concludes by stating that she continues writing, even as men less talented than she pass the imperial examinations and that all she has are her dreams.

[71] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 177.
[72] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 177.
[73] Ropp, Paul S. (1993): 127.

4.2 Expressions regarding gender roles in the play

From the above poems it is clear why Wang Yun has been seen as an advocate for women's rights. Paul Ropp points out that "As distinguished from drama, short stories, or novels, poetry was generally assumed to be autobiographical and non-fictional."[74] Therefore, it is not surprising that especially the poetry in *Fanhua meng* has often been regarded as expressing Wang Yun's own feelings and thoughts. If we take these sections of the play as Wang Yun's expression of her own feelings and not just as fictional words written for Wang Menglin, Wang Yun was clearly quite frustrated and resentful about being born a woman and the lack of career options this entailed. From writings about her by people who knew her, it seems probable that Wang Yun was indeed expressing her own feelings. In his postface to *Fanhua meng* Wang Yun's father, Wang Yuanchang, wrote that his daughter had always been unusually talented and good at understanding books. He also mentions that she wrote this play to express her feelings of hate about being a woman.[75] Her son Wang Bailing mentions in his postface to the play: "Out of a constant regret over being unable to gain titles in the imperial examinations and having no opportunity to enter civil service, she wrote this play to express her wish-fulfilling fantasy."[76] He continues by saying that his mother always encouraged him to study hard and that it was up to him to fulfil her wish.[77]

However, although she was probably expressing her own feelings about being born a woman and her longing for a way to put her talent and skills to use, she does not seem to advocate equal rights for women nor does she revolt against societal norms. Even in the aforementioned two poems that are the more extreme examples from the play, the author only complains about her fate and does not suggest any change for herself, let alone for women in general.

When reading the entire play we also get a different image of Wang Yun and the play's protagonist Wang Menglin. Although the main character in the play wishes to pursue a career for herself, it does not seem like she is trying to advocate equal rights for women in any way. After the protagonist Wang Menglin has been changed into a man, he does not try to liberate other women, nor does he seem to have any problem with their traditional gender roles. He acts just like other men do, marrying a wife and concubines who are expected to be obedient to him and behave like proper ladies. He even buys two girls to be given to his

[74] Ropp, Paul S. (1993): 111.
[75] Mao Jie 毛劼 (2014): 180.
[76] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 183.
[77] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 183.

brother as concubines, even telling them to "please wait on him with tender care."[78] Wang Menglin clearly does not want to give these women rights equal to the ones he has, and although it is clear that many of the women in the story are literate (at least his wife and concubines), none of them are offered the chance of a career or any other kind of life outside of the traditional gender roles.

Therefore, it seems that Wang Yun did not try to advocate equal rights for women in this play. Wang Menglin had to change into a man before being able to pursue a career and enjoy the freedom to travel and marry whomever. By doing this, Wang Yun conforms to the conventional gender roles of her time where only a man could do such things. She also does not challenge the idea that women should stay in the inner quarters. Wang Menglin and Wang Yun both clearly feel frustrated about their inability to pursue a career, but in the end Wang Yun is a product of her time and cannot envision a way for her nor any other woman to genuinely live a man's life without first becoming a man.

4.3 The play's ending and message

Upon awaking from her dream, Wang Menglin feels sad and frustrated and longs to return to her life as a man with her three beauties. After living a depressing life as a woman for a while, the immortal Magu comes down to talk to her. The immortal Magu describes her reasons for coming down as follows:

> "Now a Lady Wang on the earth has lost herself in inexpressible sorrows caused by a passionate dream. I will go down and drop her a hint of disillusionment. Then I will guide her to my Gate of the Immortals."[79]

Then Wang enters the stage, singing about her sleepless nights and lack of appetite since she woke up from her wonderful dream. After this she writes down the second poem mentioned in chapter 4, where she complains about her fate as a woman. Upon Magu's appearance, Wang Menglin states that she wants Magu as her master and that she wants "to be released from the sufferings of this world."[80]

Upon being asked the reason for the passionate dream, Magu answers:

[78] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 151.
[79] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 174.
[80] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 179.

> "Nothing needs to be explained. It is all caused by your resentment against your fate of being a woman. Your daily sorrows and frustrations, distilled by a mind of wild imagination, have produced such a world of fantasy."[81]

Magu explains how her dream is solely the result of her own grief over being a woman and that the dream and everyone in it were never real. When Wang Menglin realizes this she says: "I have finally seen through my stubborn foolishness and been released from my greed for wealth and fame. Immortal, please take me as your disciple."[82] Wang Menglin claims she has awoken to the truth now and wishes to become Magu's disciple. However, Magu deems it still too early and thinks Wang Menglin requires more time to rid herself of her desires before being allowed to accompany her to the Land of the Immortals. After Magu has left, Wang Menglin appears to no longer yearn for her fantasy world and ready to dedicate herself to enlightenment.[83] Qingyun Wu has described this ending as "the death of utopian imagination"[84] as Wang Menglin's story ends in disillusionment. Wang Yun concludes her play with a message, not just to women but to all, that everyone needs to wake up from their dream. She says: "A woman as well as a man needs, // A wakening return from a life gone astray."[85]

It is interesting that Wang Yun chose for the immortal Magu as the one who descends to lead Wang Menglin to the path towards enlightenment. The immortal Magu, also named Hemp Lady or Goddess of the East, appears in other stories as well, such as in the *Illustrated Immortal's Biographies*, where she and her brother visit a mortal who is to become immortal.[86] She is often described as a beautiful girl of around eighteen and can be recognized by her unique birdlike claws, as she is likely a crane-woman.[87] She is said to symbolise the slow flooding and draining of the Watchet Sea for thousands of years and therefore represents cosmic time.[88] However, she is also associated with women looking for immortality and enlightenment. Susan Mann describes in her book how on birthdays older women would call

[81] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 179.
[82] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 180.
[83] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 180-181.
[84] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 20.
[85] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 182.
[86] Kohn, Livia (1993): 355-358.
[87] Schafer, Edward H. (1985): 92-93.
[88] Schafer, Edward H. (1985): 94.

on Daoist immortals for long life and pray and bow before a drawing of Magu.[89] The woman would also be greeted with the wish, "May you live as long as the immortal Ma Gu.[90]"

A turn to religion was not uncommon for women, but often it was not possible for them to devote themselves to religion fully until their daughters-in-law would take over the household management. Taking the Daoist path towards immortality would involve techniques of inner alchemy that would lead to spiritual and bodily transformation. For women, their body played a significant role as the female body was believed to require purification from its polluting blood.[91]

One might wonder why Wang Yun chose to end her play with Wang Menglin seeking Daoist Enlightenment. Although she uses references to several popular Chinese religions throughout the play, Qingyun Wu suggests that Wang Yun was herself pursuing the Daoist path at the time of writing the play.[92] However, unlike Wang Menglin, it seems Wang Yun never gave up her dream of living like a man and that she remained frustrated with her body. Her interest in Daoism at the time might explain her choice for a Daoist ending and she may have wanted to give Wang Menglin the peaceful ending that she herself did not manage to find.

Through Daoist enlightenment Wang Menglin could not only find peace of mind, but also purify herself from the pollution caused by womanhood. This might make her a somewhat less female. One might say that this ending confirms that the play is not as radical as some people thought, as in the end Wang Menglin accepts she is a woman and no longer tries to become a man or live like a man. However, this does free her from her frustration about being a woman and the search for Daoist enlightenment saves her from the typical woman's life. Therefore, with this ending, Wang Yun does not seem to encourage women to pursue equal rights. It seems like she wants to give women the message that they should not live in dreams, but accept who they are. When they cannot be content with their sex, they can use religion as way to escape the typical woman's life and learn to be content.

[89] Mann, Susan (1997): 69.
[90] Mann, Susan (1997): 69.
[91] Mann, Susan (1997): 69-72.
[92] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 26.

5. Gender identity in *Fanhua meng*

5.1 Cross-dressing vs. body transformation

Although gender inequality is an important motif in the play and one of the reasons for its fame, gender in *Fanhua meng* has not been studied in-depth. Therefore, in this chapter, I attempt to examine this issue more closely.

Stories about women assuming male gender roles were nothing new in Wang Yun's time. Cross-dressing was a widely used literary device from the seventeenth century onwards. In cases where women dress as men, this is usually to escape from dangerous situations or to try to gain the same opportunities as men.[93]

Although cross-dressing plots were widely used, Wang Yun decided to go one step further and have her protagonist undergo a body transformation in a dream, instead of just a change of clothes. She was not the first to use this kind of plot. However, according to Qingyun Wu, Wang Yun was the "first and only playwright who employs such a cross-gender device to purposely set a woman free with all her desires from her oppressed social and psychological state."[94] The differences between cross-dressing and a genuine change of body are important. In many narratives about women dressing as men, the women ultimately return to their appropriate female gender roles, whether voluntarily or forced.[95] By ending these stories with the women becoming good, virtuous wives and mothers, the cross-dressing phase of their lives gets a very temporary character and is therefore not a way to permanently satisfy a woman's desire for equal opportunities. Because in the end these women return to their female gender roles, they do not challenge the existing gender roles and patriarchy. Therefore, even though some of these stories may seem radical, they are not a threat to men and the existing status quo in gender roles, which is also not surprising as most of these stories were written by men themselves. In one of the poems discussed earlier Wang Menglin states "I am not fated to be a Mulan or a Chonggu."[96] Therefore Wang Yun was surely familiar with some of the narratives in which women dress as men. Qingyun Wu has suggested that "Although mainstream Confucian culture enshrined Huang Chonggu and Hua Mulan as female models, Wang Yun was intelligent enough to see that this paragon system was an unrealistic trap for

[93] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 11-12.
[94] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 12.
[95] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 12.
[96] Wu, Qingyun (2008):53.

women."[97] Wang Yun likely realized the problems of using cross-dressing in narratives and thus chose a different approach for her plays.

In Wang Yun's case, she and her alter ego Wang Menglin both long to permanently play male gender roles so consequently cross-dressing would not have been sufficient. However, because Wang Yun knows that there is no way for her to change into a man for real, she does not make Wang Menglin's body change permanently either. Wang Yun could have ended the story with Wang Menglin living happily ever after as a man, but such an ideal ending might have been too unrealistic for her, since this was not an option for herself and she still had to live with her frustration about being a woman.

Therefore, she does change Wang Menglin back into a woman and it is at this point that Wang Menglin realizes her life as a man was nothing but a dream. This kind of dream plot was not new. One play with a similar dream plot that influenced Wang Yun was Golder Millet Dream 枕中记 by Shen Jiji 沈既濟(c.740-c.800). In this story the protagonist Lu Sheng is sleeping in an inn while the innkeeper cooks millet. Lu Sheng dreams of having a wonderful life with fame and riches. However, when he wakes up he realizes the emptiness and temporariness of life and finds enlightenment.[98] Possibly this story not only inspired Wang Yun to use a dream in her play, but also to give the play an ending of Daoist enlightenment.

5.2 Sex vs. gender

In order to analyse the use of gender in the play, it is important to first make the distinction between sex and gender. In this paper I use the word 'sex' to refer to the biological differences between men and women, based purely on physical characteristics. I use Connell's definition of 'gender' meaning "the cultural difference of women from men, based on the biological division between male and female."[99] Gender is thus a social construct and culture-specific.[100] Both sex and gender in this sense may seem binary, but are in fact non-binary. Especially when it comes to gender, everyone is a combination of male and female characteristics.[101] However, for the sake of convenience I refer to female/male gender in this paper when referring to people who seem to mainly identity themselves as female or male and

[97] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 6.
[98] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 24.
[99] Connel, R.W. (2002): 8.
[100] Marchbank, Jennifer & Letherby, Gayle (2007): 3.
[101] Connel, R.W. (2002): 5.

who appear to be comfortable with their gender roles. As someone's gender identity is difficult to find out, I will mainly look for signs of gender expression here.

Most scholars discussing *Fanhua meng* who use the word gender use it as a substitute for the word sex and do not clearly explain at any point whether they refer to sex or gender respectively. This sometimes leads to imprecise analyses of the play and to my knowledge no scholar has ever studied the roles of sex and gender in the play separately.

5.3 Gender in the play

It is clear from the play that Wang Menglin initially has the body of a woman and that this later changes into the body of a man and then back into the body of a woman at the end of the play. Therefore throughout the play it is quite evident what Wang Menglin's sex is. However, it is much less clear what her gender is and whether this changes throughout the play.

Qingyun Wu seems to suggest Wang Menglin's gender identity is female throughout the play, mainly because of her focus on Wang Menglin as a lesbian woman in the play. Although she regularly uses the word 'cross-gender' which would imply that Wang Menglin goes through a change of gender and does not have the same gender throughout the play, she seems to use this word only to refer to Wang Menglin's bodily change. She also refers to Wang Yun and Wang Menglin as androgynous women,[102] without actually explaining what she means with this 'androgynous' identity and where this idea comes from. Consequently, it is difficult to say for sure what her ideas on Wang Menglin and Wang Yun's gender identity exactly are.

However, I argue that although Wang Menglin's gender identity is somewhere on the non-binary scale, there are several arguments to make it likely she is supposed to be seen as having a male gender. Her clear discontent with the female gender roles and her contentment while fulfilling her role as a man point in this direction. Also, towards the end of the play, the immortal Magu says: "It is all caused by your resentment against you fate of being a woman."[103], therefore making clear that this resentment is so strong that she even has a vivid dream about living as a man. In addition, the role of the protagonist Wang Menglin is supposed to be played by a male actor throughout the play.[104] Consequently, the audience keeps seeing the same actor, even after Wang Menglin's transformation. This could have been

[102] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 14, 16.
[103] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 179.
[104] Liu Siyuan (2010): 373.

a way for Wang Yun to make clear to her audience that Wang Menglin remains the same person and that only her body changed and can be interpreted as Wang Menglin having the same gender identity throughout the play. This still leaves the question of what her gender identity is, but the fact that Wang Menglin is played by a man could point to her being a man deep down all along. It is difficult to say what this means for Wang Yun's gender identity, because we do not know the extent to which Wang Menglin is a description of Wang Yun herself. As mentioned, her family knew she aspired to a career that was only open to men, but that in itself does not imply she did not see herself as a woman. It is possible she used someone with a female body and male gender to symbolize and play out the male side within herself.

As for the other characters in the play, we can assume that for most of them their gender identity matches with their assigned sex at birth. Other than Wang Menglin, no one appears to be discontent with their gender roles and Wang Menglin's three lovers all seem to be quite satisfied with being the typical virtuous wife/concubine. They even perform stereotypical women's tasks, such as embroidery. For example, scene 4 mostly consists of Lady Xie and her maids embroidering and walking in the garden while talking.[105] They do not seem to be discontent with their lives as women and would therefore presumably identify themselves as female.

6. Sexuality in *Fanhua meng*

Because of her body transformation and the ambiguity of her gender identity, Wang Menglin's sexuality is difficult to assess. Qingyun Wu has suggested that Wang Menglin is a lesbian[106] and that this is an important motif in the play. She considers this to be an important reason as to why Wang Menglin's transformation occurred, and suggests: "But Lady Wang's dream of success in the masculine world is kindled by her passion for three women. She always values love over career even after she gains fame and wealth as a man."[107] Therefore, Wu considers love, not career, to be the main reason as to why Wang Menglin wants to be a man. This interpretation of the play seems to be based mainly on Wang Menglin's remarks about the beauties just before falling asleep and being transformed into a man, and on the fact

[105] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 59-61.
[106] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 12-18.
[107] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 11.

that the majority of the play focuses on the interaction with and between the various women, not on Wang Menglin's career.

It is particularly interesting that her play focuses so much on the love and the interaction with the three beauties, especially since Wang Yun otherwise seemed to have been more interested in plays about themes other than love. Wang Yun wrote several poems commenting on plays by other people. Deng Dan has pointed out that unlike most women, who wrote comments on plays with themes like love or women, Wang Yun mostly commented on plays about scholars or history. In these remarks she focuses mainly on talented men which is consistent with what we know about her from writings by her family members, namely that she aspired to a scholarly career. Therefore, it would make sense that she would be interested in other stories of talented people who did not get recognition or a chance to prove their worth like herself.

However, there are possible explanations for her choosing to focus on the women in the play instead of Wang Menglin's career. Wang Yun may have believed this would make her play more exciting and interesting to others. This way she allows more room for the female characters, enabling her to show the differences between different types of women. She also describes the world she knows best, the world of women, enabling her to make her play appear more realistic. In addition, her play centres on gender differences and consequently it is only logical that the play includes male and female characters. If she had chosen to focus the play on Wang Menglin's career, the play would likely have included less female characters, therefore moving her focus away from the differences in gender roles. Moreover, it was common for women to write about love[108] so Wang Yun may have thought it would be more acceptable if she wrote about this.

As for lesbianism inspiring her to become a man, the poems at the beginning of the play and the commentary on the play make it seem more likely that the pursuit of a career was a significantly more important motivation. Before she falls asleep, Wang Menglin does praise the beauty of the woman on the scroll that she is looking at, and says: "If I were a man, I would definitely seek a lady like her to marry."[109] After this she calls out for the beauty and recalls the two beauties she met a year before. However, this occurs immediately after Wang Menglin lamented her lack of career opportunities. Although it can be interpreted as Wang Menglin being lesbian, it is also possible that Wang Yun only intended this passage as Wang

[108] Ropp, Paul S. (1993): 109.
[109] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 55.

Menglin appreciating the beauty of another woman without any extended sexual meaning and that this is merely an expression of her longing for female companionship.

None of Wang Yun's contemporaries seem to have interpreted Wang Menglin's relationship with the three beauties as being lesbian.[110] References to love between women and sexual acts between them exist in Chinese literature starting from ancient times.[111] Susan Mann suggests that lesbian attraction between women during the High Qing was also not deemed abnormal.[112] There were even female writers who expressed their lesbianism in their writings, writing stories about the lesbian love between two women.[113] If Wang Yun was lesbian and intended to write about this in her play, one might wonder why she did not do this through two women who both have female bodies. Because lesbian love was not unheard of, one might expect that if the readers of *Fanhua meng* had interpreted the play as a play about lesbian love, they would have been able to comment on that. Even though the Western concept of lesbianism did not exist at the time, they would still have been able to comment on the theme of love and sexual attraction between women without using the word lesbianism.

Qingyun Wu argues that there are also suggestions pointing towards lesbianism between some of the female characters in *Fanhua meng*. Some of the examples of this given by her are: "Lady Huang and Lady Hu become intimate as they live together daily."[114] and "Madam Wang expresses compassion at the first sight of Lady Hu."[115] However, none of these examples are definite signs of lesbianism and it seems a bit farfetched to see all female characters in the play as lesbians because of such sentences.

In addition, if we consider Wang Menglin's gender to be male throughout the play, then even if one would interpret the play as Wang Menglin longing for women in a sexual way, this would not be lesbian passion. After the transformation Wang Menglin would then be a man, both physically and mentally, and therefore loving women can only be described as being heterosexual. Before the transformation Wang Menglin would still have a female body, but identify herself as a man. In this case it would depend on whether the used definition of hetero- and homosexuality depends on sex or gender to decide what Wang Menglin's sexuality would have been before her transformation.

[110] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 20.
[111] Bullough, Vern L. & Ruan, Fang Fu (1992): 218.
[112] Mann, Susan (1997): 60.
[113] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 17.
[114] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 18.
[115] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 18.

As for Wang Yun, it is hard to say anything about her sexuality. There is no evidence that she was a lesbian.[116] We know that she married and gave birth to a son, but with marriage often being forced upon young girls, this does not guarantee that she was heterosexual either. However, there is no evidence to suggest she was likely a lesbian.

Conclusion

Wang Yun was an incredibly talented woman. Although we do not know much about her life, she does seem to have been a product of her time. Growing up in an elite family that encouraged her literary pursuits, she quickly became frustrated with the fact that her talent was wasted. Her frustration with the lack of prospects was felt by many other contemporary women who also received an education but had no chance of using their knowledge to better the country. While her play *Fanhua meng* was a way for her to let out her feelings of frustration, the play is not as extreme as some scholars believed based on excerpts they had read. Although Wang Yun expresses her grief in quite extreme wording, she does not challenge the existing gender roles of her time. By having her protagonist Wang Menglin change into a man in order for her to realize her dreams, she confirms that a career is indeed only the domain of men and that becoming a man is the only way for women to achieve this. After the transformation Wang Menglin treats women according to the accepted gender norms and does not make any attempt to grant them more freedom, again confirming that Wang Yun could not envision a world in which gender roles were radically different. In the play's ending, Wang Menglin devotes herself to becoming a Daoist immortal free from the desire to be a man instead of challenging gender roles or continuing to fight to live the way she wanted to. She ends the play with the message that you should not live in dreams, but learn to be content and use religion as a means of escape. Therefore, she does not seem to advocate gender equality and I do not believe she was the feminist that some thought her to be.

When analysing the play while using concepts such as sexuality and gender, the play becomes more difficult and open to interpretation. We will never know how much thought Wang Yun put into consciously portraying Wang Menglin as having a certain gender identity and sexuality. However, the fact that Wang Menglin's body undergoes a transformation does raise the question of her gender identity. As Wang Menglin is played by a male actor and is generally unhappy about being a woman, it is quite possible Wang Menglin was a man deep

[116] Wu, Qingyun (2008): 18.

down all along. Determining her gender identity is also crucial in attempting to discover Wang Menglin's sexual orientation in the play. Both are open to interpretation, but I have argued that Wang Menglin might be a heterosexual man. There are no clues in the play that point towards Wang Menglin definitely being a lesbian, and as Wang Menglin may have the male gender throughout the play, love for women would be heterosexual love. It is difficult to say what the implications of this are for Wang Yun as the author, as we do not know to what extend Wang Menglin was meant to be her alter ego. However, it is clear that this complicated and fascinating play deserves more attention and requires further studying for us to fully understand its implications. More research into the lives and writings of women like Wang Yun will give us a better understanding of their lives and will be a valuable addition to written histories of China.

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