

## Zhao Luanluan and Her Tale

### Introduction

“Misattributions are harder to slay than vampires.”<sup>1</sup> The original context in which this remark was made concerns the attribution of “Qi bu shi” 七步詩 (Poem in Seven Paces) to Cao Zhi 曹植 (192-232), popularized through the great historical novel, *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms), but it also applies to the subject of this paper, the poetic writings attributed to a woman named Zhao Luanluan 趙鸞鸞. She is the main protagonist of an early Ming dynasty work of fiction, the “Luanluan zhuan” 鸞鸞傳 or “The Tale of Luanluan” by Li Changqi 李昌祺 (1376-1452, *jinsbi* 1404), which is found in his collection of twenty-two short stories: *Jiandeng yuhua* 剪燈餘話 (More Stories Written While Trimming the Lamp).<sup>2</sup> “The Tale of Luanluan” describes the idyllic marriage of the beautiful and intelligent poet with her devoted husband, Liu Ying 柳穎, which is brutally interrupted by the warfare and banditry that marked the end of the Yuan dynasty. Taken prisoner and enslaved, Zhao Luanluan is eventually tracked down and freed by Liu Ying, but their reunion is only short-lived. Liu Ying is murdered, and Zhao Luanluan commits suicide by throwing herself onto her husband’s pyre. This tragic tale of love and loss is punctuated by verse: Zhao Luanluan is characterized as a poet of great ability, and the tale includes two linked sets of poems—one a series of erotic verses that she writes for Liu Ying; the other a sequence of autobiographical

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<sup>1</sup> Cutter 2002: 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Jiandeng yuhua*, 2:39-43. The official biography of Li Changqi is given in *Mingshi*, 161:4375-4376; see also Goodrich 1976: 805-807.

poems about her experiences as a prisoner-of-war that she smuggles out to him during her time in captivity. Both of these series of poetic works are highly original, but the problem remains that Zhao Luanluan is a fictional character, and her poems were written by a man: Li Changqi.

From the late Ming dynasty onwards, the Zhao Luanluan poems have been subject to significant misrepresentation. At this time, the characterization of Zhao Luanluan as an educated young woman from a wealthy gentry family in Dongping County 東平縣, Shandong Province, seems to have been seen as more and more at odds with the contents of the writings attributed to her, in particular the erotic poems. As a result, a new ‘Zhao Luanluan’ was invented, a Tang dynasty courtesan, who could then have some (but not all) of these verses ascribed to her authorship.<sup>3</sup> This Tang dynasty courtesan character, with five of the six Zhao Luanluan erotic poems attributed to her, not only appears in numerous anthologies of Chinese women’s writings, but has even made her appearance in the *Quan Tangshi* 全唐詩 (Complete Poetry of the Tang Dynasty) and other compilations of Tang literature.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Tang courtesan ‘Zhao Luanluan’ continues to cause problems in understanding the history of Chinese literature right up to the present day, because comparatively few scholars seem to be aware that she is a late Ming dynasty invention.<sup>5</sup> In this

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, fictional versions of genuine historical individuals will have their name given in inverted commas, also the further fictionalized versions of invented characters.

<sup>4</sup> *Quan Tangshi* 2002, 802:3077. Translations of poems attributed to ‘Zhao Luanluan’ appear in Rexroth and Chung 1972: 26-30; and Chang and Saussy 1999: 76-78. There have also been a number of studies of her writings, including Kadlecová-Krylova 2002 and 2006.

<sup>5</sup> A handful of scholars have raised the issue of the authenticity of the Tang ‘Zhao Luanluan’, most notably Ford 2004: 175-181. Her analysis seems to be the first to demonstrate that ‘Zhao Luanluan’ was a fictional creation, and to note the connection with the *Jiandeng yuhua* character.

paper, therefore, I will begin by considering the character of Zhao Luanluan as it is developed in “The Tale of Luanluan.” After that, the process by which the Tang ‘Zhao Luanluan’ was created will be considered, whereby late Ming dynasty publications excerpted some of the erotic poems in order to divorce them from their original context, and reattributed them to a courtesan, who would be an acceptable author of sexually explicit verse. This process is symptomatic of a much bigger problem, whereby the poetry found in works of fiction (whether attributed to a fictionalized historical individual or an entirely invented character) migrates into other texts, and is eventually assumed to be genuine. This has had a disastrous effect not only on understanding of the Zhao Luanluan pieces, but also of other closely related writings. Finally, this paper will examine the poems that were not reattributed to the Tang courtesan, to argue that this is because any such change would have required a significant rewriting of the text. Ming and Qing dynasty scholars were happy to create one fictional Zhao Luanluan after another, but they were not prepared to touch a single word that ‘she’ wrote.

### “The Tale of Luanluan”

“The Tale of Luanluan” is derived from the collection of short stories by Li Changqi, published under the title *Jiandeng yuhua*. Li Changqi, a native of Luling 廬陵 in what is now Jiangxi Province, was a highly respected administrative official and a distinguished scholar, noted particularly for his prose fiction writings, of which the *Jiandeng yuhua* is by far the best known. According to Li Changqi’s own preface to his collection (dated 1419), these short stories were produced over the course of a number of years; and the text has three further prefaces (all dated to 1420) written by senior scholar-officials of the day: Zeng Qi 曾榮 (1372-1432); Wang Ying 王英 (1376-1450); and Luo Rujing 羅汝敬 (1372-1439). All of these individuals passed the *jinsbi*

examinations in the same year as Li Changqi, and all were natives of Jiangxi Province.<sup>6</sup> The earliest surviving printed edition of the text, published by Zhang Guangqi 張光啓, dates to 1433.<sup>7</sup> There appear to be no earlier records that can independently confirm the existence of Zhao Luanluan as a historical personage of the late Yuan dynasty, and it should therefore be presumed that she is a fictional character, invented by Li Changqi. A poet of Li Changqi's skill and experience would also be perfectly capable of composing the poems attributed in this text to Zhao Luanluan. In the absence of further information coming to light, it should be assumed that this Yuan dynasty gentlewoman who wrote erotic verse for the delectation of her husband was completely imaginary.

“The Tale of Luanluan” begins by describing the circumstances of her two marriages. She was initially betrothed to the son of a neighbour, Liu Ying, but the engagement was broken off and both married someone else. In the case of Zhao Luanluan, she is said to have undergone a short and unhappy marriage to a wealthy but uneducated son of the Miao family, who died a few months after the wedding. She then returns to her parent's house, and when Liu Ying's first wife dies, the two of them are wed. At this point it transpires that Zhao Luanluan is a virgin widow, her husband's poor health having precluded any kind of sexual relationship. The pair enjoy an idyllic companionate marriage, which is quickly interrupted by the violence unleashed by the collapse of the Yuan dynasty. During the course of 1358, their hometown is first sacked by Tian Feng 田豐 (d. 1362), then by the

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<sup>6</sup> Jia Bing 2007: 56, considers the background and careers of the scholar-officials who wrote prefaces for the *Jiandeng yubua*, but incorrectly gives Wang Ying as a native of Zhejiang. This paper follows the account of his background given in Pan Rongsheng 2006: 20.

<sup>7</sup> The 1433 deluxe edition of the *Jiandeng yubua*, with its numerous illustrations, is the subject of a special study concerning the integration of pictures and text in “The Tale of Luanluan;” see Qin Wen and Zhang Yuqin 2017.

forces of Mao Gui 毛貴 (d. 1359).<sup>8</sup> In the ensuing confusion, Zhao Luanluan becomes separated from her husband. By the time he has discovered her whereabouts, she has been imprisoned for some time, before finally being allocated to the household of Brigade Commander Zhou 周千戶 in Ji'nan. (The narrative repeatedly stresses that she has successfully resisted rape, and that the wife of Brigade Commander Zhou is so jealous that she keeps female captives confined together in a separate residence, away from her husband). Liu Ying, spurred to action to recover his wife by reading her linked poems entitled “Beijia sipai” 悲笳四拍 or “Four Songs on a Sad Flute,” is able to purchase her freedom from Brigade Commander Zhou’s wife with a gift of jewelry. Reunited, Liu Ying and Zhao Luanluan enjoy a short period of happiness together, living in seclusion in a remote mountain area. However, Liu Ying is soon discovered and killed by rebels serving under Tian Feng, and having built a funeral pyre for him, Zhao Luanluan commits suicide by throwing herself into the flames.

“The Tale of Luanluan” should be understood as fictional, and a number of the life experiences attributed to the eponymous heroine would have been at the very least problematic if not outright illegal during the Yuan dynasty. At this period, breaking a formal engagement unilaterally was against the law (as it had been under previous dynasties) and was severely punished. Furthermore, the fidelity of widows to their deceased husbands and their families was legally enforced; initially in 1272 levirate marriage was imposed upon the Chinese population of the Mongol empire, but this regulation was extremely unpopular, hence in 1276 the law was changed to

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<sup>8</sup> The role of these two men in the violence of the Yuan-Ming transition era in Shandong, including specifically around Dongping County, is described in *Yuanshi*, 45:935-953; and *Mingshi*, 122:3681-3684. See also Zhu Huo 1962; and Qiu Shusen 1980. For a general overview of the violence of the Red Turbans rebellion; see Robinson 2009: 130-159.

allow widows to remain faithful to the memory of their deceased husband, whereby they could refuse to remarry at all. In 1309, although a widowed woman might return to live with her natal family, the power to arrange a second marriage was vested in her late husband's relatives, and neither she nor her family were given any say in her fate.<sup>9</sup> Zhao Luanluan's situation as described in "The Tale of Luanluan" is therefore a fantasy in which the heroine is able to return to her own parents after the death of her first husband. Furthermore she organizes her own remarriage to Liu Ying after the death of his first wife—another thing that would be impossible in real life. However, her remarriage is made less controversial for readers by emphasizing that she was originally intended to be Liu Ying's wife, that she was extremely unhappy that their engagement was broken off, and that she did not actually have a sexual relationship with her first husband. This being the case, it is more difficult to argue that her second marriage represents a loss of chastity or failure of virtue, since her relationship with Liu Ying is given primacy.

In "The Tale of Luanluan" the writings attributed to Zhao Luanluan are presented in a context which ensures an autobiographical reading. In the case of her six poems about body parts, they given an overtly sexualized representation of her physical being, but one that is neutralized by being offered exclusively to her husband. Likewise, Zhao Luanluan's ability to outshine Liu Ying in literary composition is rendered acceptable to readers by stressing that it is an expression of her overwhelming devotion to him. (In this, "The Tale of Luanluan" can be compared to the early Ming dynasty unofficial biography of the great female poet Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084-ca. 1155) which

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<sup>9</sup> For an assessment of Yuan dynasty legislation affecting the position of widows; see Bossler 2013: 406-410. See also Birge 2002 and 2017, for a detailed consideration of how these legal changes affected the position of women in Yuan dynasty society in theory and practice.

stated—against all evidence—that her poetry was really all intended to articulate her love for her husband).<sup>10</sup> However, Zhao Luanluan is also given a willful edge, since she insists on giving weight to her own opinions and ideas:

In leisure moments she would amuse herself by reading the *Book of Odes* and “Encountering Sorrow” with [Liu] Ying.<sup>11</sup> She composed poetry about her own feelings, and even such topics as Wu Jiangxian’s beauty or Cao Wenji’s talents would be thoughtfully discussed. One of [Liu] Ying’s cousins, on his return from the capital, had made a note of the six amusing boudoir poems composed by Academician Guan [Yunshi 雲石] (1286-1324) to the titles: “Cloud-like Hair”, “Sandalwood Mouth”, “Willow-leaf Eyebrows”, “Creamy Breasts”, “Silky Fingers”, and “Fragrant Hooked [Feet].”<sup>12</sup> Ying borrowed them and went home, and read them with Luan[luan]. He was going to come up with something using the same form, but before he had composed anything, Luan[luan] had already produced her own [set of poems]... She wrote them out and handed them to Ying. He was impressed by her cleverness and accordingly put down his own brush.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This unofficial biography does not survive, but is quoted by Yi Shizhen 伊世珍 in the *Langhuan ji* 瑯嬛記 (A Record of Fairyland); see Chu Binjie 1984: 28-29. For an analysis of these fragments; see Egan 2013: 217-227.

<sup>11</sup> The *Book of Odes* was considered appropriate reading matter for women since at least the time of the Han dynasty; see Kinney 2012.

<sup>12</sup> If these poems ever existed, they do not survive; see Ford 2004: 175-177. The sequence attributed to Guan Yunshi is mentioned elsewhere by Xu Boling 徐伯齡 (fl. 1457-1465), but there a poem entitled “Xingyan” 星眼 (Eyes like Stars) is given instead of “Yunhuan” 雲鬢 (Cloud-like Hair); see Xu Boling 1985, 11:15b-16b.

<sup>13</sup> *Jiandeng yuhua*, 2:41.

暇則與穎玩繹詩騷，吟詠情性，若吳絳仙之容華，曹文姬之藻思，不屑論也。穎中表兄弟，有自都下回者，錄得貫學士蘭房謔詠六題曰：雲鬢，檀口，柳眉，酥乳，纖指，香鈎，凡六首。穎借歸，與鸞觀之，將效其體制而構思未就。鸞輒先賦... 寫以呈穎。穎服其敏妙，爲之攔筆。

In this passage, reference is made to two other women poets, both of whom are fictional. It is not clear whether Li Changqi was aware of this, and intended these women to appear as a fiction-within-a-fiction; or whether he simply wanted to highlight his main protagonist's appreciation of the talent of other women wherever this was to be found. According to a number of later sensationalized accounts of the harem of Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty 隋煬帝 (r. 604-618), Wu Jiangxian was one of his favourite concubines who was a highly skilled poet.<sup>14</sup> However, by the late Ming dynasty, the one poem attributed to her authorship is included in a number of anthologies of women's poetry just as if she were a real person, though she also continued to appear in the ever popular novelizations about the decadent sex life of Emperor Yang produced at this time, such as the *Sui Yangdi yanshi* 隋煬帝艷史 (The Romantic History of Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty), first published in 1631.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile Cao Wenji is a fictional Song dynasty courtesan, who appears in the

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<sup>14</sup> The textual history of the texts in which the character of Wu Jiangxian first appears is extremely confused; see Li Jianguo 2017: 700-709. Some late Tang dynasty accounts of Wu Jiangxian do not quote her poem; see for example the *Nanbu yanhua ji* 南部煙花記 (A Record of Romantic Adventures in the South), attributed to Feng Zhi 馮贇 (fl. 904), included in the *Shuofu*, 66:7a ["Nü Xiangru" 女相如]. Others, such as the *Sui yi lu, xia* 下:6, attributed to Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581-645) do. The problem arises because the *Nanbu yanhua ji* is supposed to merely be an alternative title for the *Sui yi lu*, but this is not the case. Significant textual differences exist between these two pieces, which have not been fully resolved or explained.

<sup>15</sup> The one poem attributed to Wu Jiangxian appears in anthologies including the *Mingyuan huishi*, 2:20b; and *Mingyuan shigui*, 7:15b. See also Qidong yeren 2000: 408-412.



“Shuxian zhuan” 書仙傳 or “Tale of Shuxian” found in the *Qingsuo gaoyi* 青瑣高議 (Lofty Opinions from a Noble House) by Liu Fu 劉斧 (fl. 1073).<sup>16</sup> This text includes two poems composed by the female main protagonist, one of which is also found in a truncated form in the *Quan Tangshi* attributed to a Tang dynasty courtesan.<sup>17</sup> As with other *Quan Tangshi* attributions to imaginary courtesans, it is found in earlier Ming dynasty anthologies.<sup>18</sup> However, regardless of problems of textual history discussed here, the fact that the respectable heroine of “The Tale of Luanluan” is prepared to read and discuss the works attributed to such women is intended as a comment on her character.

“The Tale of Luanluan” repeatedly plays with the tension between inner female virtue and surface circumstances, which seem to threaten the main protagonist’s reputation but where any concerns turn out to be groundless. Over and over again, the Zhao Luanluan character appears to lose her chastity, whether by remarriage or through capture by rebel soldiers, imprisonment, and enslavement, only to be vindicated by subsequent events.<sup>19</sup> However, in each case it is a private vindication: the relevant information is vouchsafed privately to her closest relatives, or in some instances to her husband alone. In the end Liu Ying is a martyr for the Yuan dynasty when he refuses to serve under a rebel commander, and Zhao Luanluan is a martyr to contemporary social norms for committing suicide to join her husband in death.<sup>20</sup> While the violence in Shandong during

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<sup>16</sup> *Qingsuo gaoyi*, *Qianji* 前集 2:29-30.

<sup>17</sup> *Quan Tangshi*, 801:3073.

<sup>18</sup> See for example *Mingyuan huishi*, 8:20a; and *Mingyuan shigui*, 15.9a.

<sup>19</sup> This analysis follows the reading of “The Tale of Luanluan” given by Xiao Xiangkai 2002: 135-136.

<sup>20</sup> For the promotion of suicide in the late Yuan dynasty as a virtuous response for a woman caught up in warfare; see Wei Xueyan 2007. In the Ming suicide was even more heavily promoted as the correct response to any threat to a

this period and the suffering inflicted on the civilian population is undoubtedly historically factual, the circumstances in which Zhao Luanluan died are concerning for those who believe her to be a genuine late Yuan dynasty gentlewoman. One of the problems in giving verisimilitude to the tale of a talented woman writer like Zhao Luanluan is the lack of a tomb as a focus for pilgrimage; exactly the same problem exists for the Song dynasty fictional woman poet Zhu Shuzhen 朱淑貞, and the creators of her legend deal with it in the same way.<sup>21</sup> Zhu Shuzhen is said to have been cremated after death, thus preventing anyone from attempting to verify her existence as a historical personage. However, the tragic end to “The Tale of Luanluan” is not only intended to explain the disappearance of its heroine, it also serves another purpose. Given that this is an early Ming text, it is important to note that the named perpetrators of the violence that claimed the lives of Zhao Luanluan and Liu Ying are not individuals who later played a role in the establishment of the new dynasty—they are *zei* 賊 (rebels).<sup>22</sup> The couple’s martyrdom is therefore politically uncontroversial and can indeed be presented in a positive light, since by dying they demonstrate their possession of highly prized qualities like loyalty and virtue, without in any way challenging the legitimacy of the Ming regime.

### **The Creation of ‘Zhao Luanluan’ and Other Imitators**

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woman’s chastity, with tens of thousands of women receiving official government recognition as martyrs; see Wu Haili and Li Xiaolong 2005.

<sup>21</sup> One of the first expressions of skepticism about the Zhu Shuzhen legend (particularly focused on the manner in which her body was supposedly disposed of) is found in Idema and Grant 2004: 244-248.

<sup>22</sup> For a later example of a Ming-Qing transition era father and daughter pair being represented as patriotic martyrs by deliberately characterizing their murderers as *zei* and not as soldiers of the nascent Qing dynasty; see Li 2014: 131-132.

The history of the reception of Zhao Luanluan's poems offers a case-study of the way in which texts can be manipulated to tell a completely different story, unintended by the original author. The only source of information about Zhao Luanluan's life and work is "The Tale of Luanluan" from the *Jiandeng yubua*. There is no evidence at all that Zhao Luanluan was a historical personage. Nevertheless, in the enthusiastic vogue for women's writings which existed in certain literary circles in the late Ming and Qing dynasties, the source of these poems, and thus the question of authorship, was either ignored or forgotten. There are numerous other examples of this kind of thing happening: for example, the Consort Hou 侯夫人 poems were excerpted from the late Tang fictional text *Milou ji* 迷樓記 (The Account of the Labyrinth) and republished as the genuine writings of a Sui dynasty woman.<sup>23</sup> Likewise the poems attributed to Xiao Guanyin 蕭觀音 (1040-1075) in the *Fenjiao lu* 焚椒錄 (Account of Burned Pepper), apparently a late Ming dynasty composition, were also removed from their original context in a work of literary fiction and circulated independently.<sup>24</sup> In the case of Zhao Luanluan, the first sequence of poems ascribed to her is a set of six poems concerned with different parts of a woman's body. In "The Tale of

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<sup>23</sup> For a detailed study of the textual history of the *Milou ji* and its dating to the late Tang dynasty; see Li Jianguo 2017: 1227-1230. The Consort Hou poems are found in a number of anthologies of women's writings, including *Mingyuan huishi*, 2:18b-19a, and 4:5b; *Mingyuan shigui*, 7:11b-14a; and *Gujin nüshi*, 2:13b-14a, and 3:4b, in which they are consistently presented as authentic. However, Consort Hou and her poems also had an ongoing presence in Chinese fiction, since they appear in historical novels set during this period; see for example Chu Renhuo 1994, 28:654-678.

<sup>24</sup> Although attributed to Wang Ding 王鼎 (d. 1106, *jinsbi* 1059) and conventionally dated to 1089, the earliest surviving copies of the *Fenjiao lu* date to the early seventeenth century, as do the first references to its existence and quotations from it; see You Li 2011. In spite of a five century gap between the death of Xiao Guanyin and the appearance of the text of the *Fenjiao lu*, the source of all the poems attributed to her, this has not prevented many scholars from expressing overwhelming admiration for her work; see for example Chen Shanshan 2014; and Xiu Xinyu 2009.

Luanluan” they are given in the following order: “Cloud-like Hair”, “Sandalwood Mouth”, “Willow-leaf Eyebrows”, “Creamy Breasts”, “Silky Fingers”, and “Fragrant Hooked [Feet].” At the time the *Jiandeng yubua* was written, it was acceptable to ascribe all these writings to the authorship of an elite Yuan dynasty woman. However, by the late Ming dynasty, attitudes had changed. As can be seen from early seventeenth century anthologies of women’s poetry, Zhao Luanluan’s work and her biography were increasingly seen as mutually incompatible. The way that late Ming scholars and admirers of women’s writings dealt with this problem is extremely interesting. Five of the six poems about the female body were reattributed to an imaginary Tang dynasty courtesan, ‘Zhao Luanluan.’<sup>25</sup> The remaining single poem, which deals with bound feet and which hence could not be included within the oeuvre of a Tang dynasty courtesan without significant rewriting, seems to have been entirely suppressed, as was the “Four Songs for a Sad Flute.”

When understanding the context in which the body poems of Zhao Luanluan should be read, it is important to understand quite how unusual these topics actually are in the history of Chinese literature. First, this series is the earliest surviving set of writings to explore the female body in a poetic sequence. Li Changqi is to be commended for producing such a highly unusual set of writings for his protagonist. Secondly, where comparable individual poems do exist, they are significantly skewed towards the more innocuous themes: hair, eyebrows, or fingers.<sup>26</sup> It is extremely

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<sup>25</sup> It is not clear exactly when the character of ‘Zhao Luanluan’ first appeared, though some scholars have suggested that this attribution was first made in the late Ming dynasty compilation *Shicang lidai shixuan* 石倉歷代詩選 (Selected Poetry from Different Dynasties Compiled by Master Shicang); see Cao Xuequan 1985, 113:29a-30a.

<sup>26</sup> To give examples of poems concerning eyebrows (male and female), this would include “Hua mei wu” 畫眉烏 (On Drawing Eyebrows Black) by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072, *jinsbi* 1030); “Nianyu guxi xufa binbai wei mei xuan ru

unusual to see poems written about the mouth; and the breasts and feet constitute eroticized zones of the female body and poets tackling such topics would run the risk of being criticized for immorality.<sup>27</sup> However, once these writings are presented as the work of a Tang dynasty courtesan, the original context is bizarrely distorted. All these poems may represent “seduction through language” but “The Tale of Luanluan” makes it quite clear that an audience of one is intended, and that is Liu Ying, her spouse.<sup>28</sup> When they are no longer part of a private communication between a respectably married wife and her husband, but the voyeuristic exploration of a woman’s body that is for sale, they have been read in a completely different and anachronistic way. These poems can then be said to reflect the commodification of the female body within pleasure-quarters of the Tang dynasty capital, a kind of literary strip-tease in which first one part of the female form and then another is revealed for the delectation of the reader, without any sense of personality or individuality attached.<sup>29</sup> For example, the poem entitled “Creamy Breasts” reads:

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chu” 年逾古希鬚髮併白惟眉玄如初 (At New Year Having Passed the Age of Seventy My Hair and Beard have Both Gone White but Only My Eyebrows Remain as Black as Ever) by Ai Xingfu 艾性夫 (Song dynasty); the “Huamei qu” 畫眉曲 (Song on Drawing Eyebrows) by Xu Fei 許棐 (d. 1249); and “Zhang Chang hua mei tu” 張敞畫眉圖 (On a Painting of Zhang Chang Drawing [His Wife’s] Eyebrows) by Mou Yan 牟巘 (1227-1311).

<sup>27</sup> The feeling that some of these subjects are more innocuous than others is borne out by the way they are treated in different Ming and Qing dynasty anthologies. Therefore, late Ming compilations such as the *Mingyuan huishi*, 8:17a-17b; *Mingyuan shigui*, 15:15a-16a; and *Gujin nüshi*, 5:26a-26b, give all five ‘Zhao Luanluan’ poems. However, the Qing *Lichao mingyuan shici*, 7:3a, only includes the hair and mouth poems; while the *Gonggu wenxuan*, 23:5a only gives the poem about hair. The Qing dynasty anthologies are clearly more conservative in their choice of pieces.

<sup>28</sup> The comment about seduction through language comes from Robertson 1992: 77, who accepts the ‘Zhao Luanluan’ attribution but nevertheless feels that these poems are not typical of verse by Tang dynasty courtesans, but are closer to the writings of women of an elite and educated background.

<sup>29</sup> Kadlecová-Krylova 2006: 401-403.

Powdered and perfumed [flesh] is damp with sweat, as are the jade tuning pegs,	粉香汗濕瑤琴軫
Stirred by spring, she is soft and supple, moist with rain.	春逗酥融錦雨膏
Having finished bathing, her beloved strokes her,	浴罷檀郎捫弄處
Sensitive and slippery are those purple grapes. <sup>30</sup>	靈華涼沁紫葡萄

When attributed to a Tang dynasty courtesan, this poem and the others are removed from their original temporal and cultural context. This in turn means that other related writings cannot be properly understood. Specifically, the next comparable sequence of poetic explorations of the female body are to be found in the short story “Zhang Hongqiao zhuan” 張紅橋傳 or “The Tale of Miss Zhang from Red Bridge,” included in the *Guang yanyi bian xuji* 廣艷異編 (*The Expanded Compilation of Tales about Beautiful and Remarkable Women*) by Wu Dazhen 吳大震 (b. ca. 1543).<sup>31</sup> This purports to tell the story of the relationship between Lin Hong 林鴻 (ca. 1341-1412), an important early Ming dynasty Fujianese poet, and his lovely and talented concubine.<sup>32</sup> This text contains a number of poems, closely related to the Zhao Luanluan pieces, which are attributed to Wang Cheng 王偁

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<sup>30</sup> *Jiandeng yuhua*, 2:41. The image of grape-like nipples is explored in Schafer 1963: 142; and Chen Xigang 2008: 20.

<sup>31</sup> *Guang yanyi bian*, 9:250-252. For the dating of this text; see Ren Minghua 2006; and Chen Baolin 2018.

<sup>32</sup> For the official biography of Lin Hong; see *Mingshi*, 286:7335-7336. The “Zhang Hongqiao zhuan” was to prove enormously influential on later representations of his life, and versions of this tale are found in other Ming and Qing dynasty texts; see for example Feng Menglong 2011, 274-277 [“Qinggan lei” 情感類]; Xu Qiu 1983, 12:260; and Zheng Fangkun 1985, 10:19b-20b.

(1370-1415), which he is said to have written after secretly observing the couple having sex.<sup>33</sup> The “Zhang Hongqiao zhuan” version of the “Creamy Breasts” poem reads:

A pair of shining globes stand proud in front of her chest,	一雙明月貼胸前
Purple forbidden fruit on pale jade orbs.	紫禁葡萄碧玉圓
Her husband makes love to her beneath the silk-curtained window,	夫婿調疏綺窗下
His “golden pillar” repeatedly sprays a shower of pearly dew. <sup>34</sup>	金莖數點露珠懸

It is most likely that the marital relationship described in the “Zhang Hongqiao zhuan” was directly inspired by “The Tale of Luanluan.” Again, during the course of the Qing dynasty, the ‘Wang Cheng’, ‘Lin Hong’, and Zhang Hongqiao poems were excerpted from their original fictional context and treated as genuine writings by two early Ming dynasty government officials and a talented concubine.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, as such the love poems addressed by ‘Lin Hong’ to Zhang Hongqiao

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<sup>33</sup> As noted by Cai Yipeng 1997: 118, from the internal chronology provided by the “Zhang Hongqiao zhuan,” the real Wang Cheng would have been four years old at the time he supposedly wrote these poems. This is just one of the many problems with the tale, all of which cumulatively suggest that it should be considered as entirely fictional.

<sup>34</sup> For this poem in its original textual context; see *Guang yanyi bian*, 9:251. The final line of this poem makes reference to the early imperial era practice of placing metal bowls on pillars in the palace of the emperor to catch falls of sweet dew or manna, which were understood as highly auspicious omens. To apply these terms to sexual activity verges on sacrilege, and as such would have added to the titillation.

<sup>35</sup> As a result, in modern scholarship it is possible to see the ‘Zhao Luanluan’ poem studied as an important ‘Tang’ work of literature about breasts, and compared to the ‘Wang Cheng’ supposedly ‘early Ming’ poem, without any understanding of the real relationship between the two texts; see for example Zou Zuyao 2009.

and vice-versa would prove influential and inspiring for later women writers.<sup>36</sup> Some of the Zhang Hongqiao poems are also to be found in English language anthologies of Chinese women's literature.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, in recent years, some of the same processes have been at work in the treatment of the Zhang Hongqiao poems as with those attributed to Zhao Luanluan; modern scholars, unhappy with the biography given in the "Zhang Hongqiao zhuan" which describes her as a woman of good family background, have argued that the comparatively explicit nature of the poetry attributed to her must mean that she was in fact a courtesan prior to her marriage to Lin Hong.<sup>38</sup> The fictional nature of the text from which all her verse is derived has been ignored, as has the desire of the original author to present a sexually fulfilling companionate marriage, not a commercial relationship between patron and prostitute.

### **Zhao Luanluan's Ignored Verses**

With the attributed of five of the Zhao Luanluan erotic poems moved to a Tang dynasty courtesan, the remaining single poem seems to have virtually disappeared. This is the "Fragrant Hooked [Feet]," and the title specifically makes reference to the shape of a female bound foot. It is not included in any Ming or Qing dynasty anthologies of women's writings, nor has it attracted the attention of translators, even those who translate all of the other poems attributed to Zhao Luanluan

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<sup>36</sup> Poems attributed to Zhang Hongqiao are quoted in the *Mingyuan shigui*, 26:15a-15b; *Mingyuan shiwei chubian*, 4:4a and 35:2a; and *Gonggui wenxuan*, 23:32b. For an account of the reception of the 'Lin Hong'-Zhang Hongqiao love affair in the writings of one late Qing woman; see Qian 2015: 44-48. Some Chinese scholars remain highly committed to the authenticity of the Zhang Hongqiao poems, in the teeth of the evidence; see for example Shen Yundi 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Chang and Saussy 1999: 150-152.

<sup>38</sup> See for example Xia Chengtao and Zhang Zhang 1986: 311.



which take women’s bodies as their subject. Both title and contents are equally responsible for the fact that this poem could not be easily reattributed to a Tang dynasty courtesan (since at this time foot-binding had not yet been introduced), and hence it was of necessity completely omitted from the newly configured oeuvre of ‘Zhao Luanluan.’ As with Li Changqi’s other poems from “The Tale of Luanluan” this is a highly original work, not least because positive representations of bound feet seem to be extremely rare in late imperial era Chinese literature.<sup>39</sup> Here, the protagonist’s bound feet are hidden (*long* 籠) and revealed (*lu* 露) in alternate lines, for the delectation of Zhao Luanluan’s husband, and by extension the readers of her tale. This poem reads:

As delicate as the spring clouds, her lightly hidden digits,	春雲薄薄輕籠筍
As lovely as the moon at night, a cunningly revealed curved [foot].	晚月娟娟巧露錐
Her trumpet-flower skirt is so long, so where can [her feet] be seen?	簇蝶裙長何處見
When she climbs down from the swing, [of course]! <sup>40</sup>	鞦韆架上下來時

The other sequence of poems attributed to Zhao Luanluan in the *Jiandeng yuhua* is the autobiographical “Four Songs for a Sad Flute.” Again, these poems were not excerpted into Ming

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<sup>39</sup> For a study of extant literature on bound feet, with particular reference to the rare positive mentions of this practice; see Ko 2005. There appear to be only a handful of references in the entire corpus of Chinese literature to *xianggou* meaning bound feet—the vast majority of literary allusions to “fragrant hooks” are to fishing hooks with tasty bait. One of the exceptions is the poem “Zhinü tu” 織女圖 (On a Painting of Women Weavers) by Sa Dula 薩度拉 (1272-1340, *jinsbi* 1327), also known as “Ti Shoujiansi suozang meiren zhijin tu” 題壽監司所藏美人織錦圖 (Colophon on a Painting of Beautiful Women Weaving Brocade Held in the Collection of Surveillance Commissioner Shou); see Chen Zhuo 1985, 80:5b-6a.

<sup>40</sup> *Jiandeng yuhua*, 2:41.

and Qing dynasty anthologies of women's writings, perhaps because the presence of two Zhao Luanluans, both exceptionally fine and original female poets, would have strained the credulity of readers. The "Four Songs for a Sad Flute" would also have been impossible to incorporate into the biography of a Tang dynasty courtesan without significant rewriting, given the numerous explicit connections made between the contents of these poems and account of the life of the eponymous heroine of "The Tale of Luanluan." In particular, the "Four Songs for a Sad Flute" makes specific reference to the temporal siting of these poems in the Yuan dynasty, and repeatedly states that the poet is a married woman who has successfully resisted rape and preserved her chastity; a claim which would be bizarre and out of place coming from a courtesan.

The "Four Songs for a Sad Flute" is clearly modelled on the "Hujia shibapai" 胡笳十八拍 (Eighteen Songs on a Nomad Flute) attributed to Cai Yan 蔡琰 (ca. 178- after 206), which purports to be an autobiographical account of her experiences as a prisoner-of-war of the Xiongnu at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty, kidnapped, raped, forced to bear two children, and then finally redeemed by ransom and allowed to return home, only to face the unbearable fact that she would never be able to see her children again.<sup>41</sup> This dramatic and tragic tale would attract a number of subsequent imitations, most notably the "Hujia shibapai" by Liu Shang 劉商 (*jinsbi* 766); Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021-1086, *jinsbi* 1042); and Li Gang 李綱 (1083-1140, *jinsbi* 1112); as well as the "Hujia qu" 胡笳曲 (Tune on the Nomad Flute) by Wen Tianxiang 文天祥 (1236-1283, *jinsbi*

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<sup>41</sup> Guo Maoqian 2003: 860-865. The authenticity of surviving poems attributed to Cai Yan is considered in Frankel 1983. The "Hujia shibapai" is here tentatively dated to the Tang dynasty.

1256).<sup>42</sup> Some of these reworkings have the poet speak in Cai Yan's voice, but others use the structure of the original piece to articulate their own experience of living through a period of warfare or dynastic collapse; for example the piece by Li Gang recasts it as a record of the Northern to Southern Song transition, while that by Wen Tianxiang documents the trauma of the fall of the Southern Song dynasty.<sup>43</sup> Li Changqi's version is in this tradition; he uses the persona of his main protagonist, Zhao Luanluan, to explore dynastic collapse through the experiences of a beautiful, talented, and vulnerable woman, who provides a voice for his lines. In real life, however, women seem not to have aspired to write matching compositions, most likely because of the challenging nature of the original text which mentions the repeated rapes inflicted on Cai Yan by her captors, not to mention her multiple marriages.<sup>44</sup> From the Song dynasty onwards, this was an increasingly controversial topic, and Confucian scholars express an ever more hardline attitude towards her, suggesting that she was immoral for remarrying as a widow, and that her failure to commit suicide proved that she had not been subjected to non-consensual sex. Such an uncompromising attitude would have concerned more conservative women and prevented them from openly expressing admiration or interest in the writings attributed to her.

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<sup>42</sup> The text of the Liu Shang piece is given in *Quan Tangshi*, 303:1176-1177. For an analysis of the two manuscript versions of this sequence (with significant textual variations) discovered at Dunhuang; see Kojima Kurama 1960. This "Hujia shibapai" is translated in Rorex and Fong 1974. For other famous reworkings of the Cai Yan piece; see Li Gang 1985, 21:1a-6a; Wang Anshi 1983, 37:2a-6b; and Wen Tianxiang 1968, 14:515-519 respectively.

<sup>43</sup> For comparative studies of these famous poems in conjunction with the original "Hujia shibapai;" see for example Hao Yunlong 2016; Yi Ruofen 2011 and 2012; and Zhao Chao 2009.

<sup>44</sup> This point is also made in Chang 2005.

Within the context of “The Tale of Luanluan” this sequence of poems fills a particular niche. The weight given to poetry as an expression of emotional experience in Chinese literature means that a poem about being taken prisoner has much more resonance and power than, say, a prose account of the same events. As a man, Li Changqi would have been comparatively unconcerned about contemporary perceptions that Cai Yan was an immoral person and her writings were unseemly for a woman, and there may even be subversive intent here: Zhao Luanluan is consistently presented as appearing unchaste to others, but in fact her virtue is impeccable; and Li Changqi may be intending to set up a parallel, whereby criticism of Cai Yan’s behaviour in marrying multiple times and being taken prisoner is in fact a failure of understanding on the part of outsiders. The “Four Songs for a Sad Flute” series reads:

When I was born, nothing had yet happened	我生之初尚無爲
But after I was born, the Yuan dynasty declined. <sup>45</sup>	我生之後元運衰
Husband and wife suddenly [find themselves] forced apart,	夫與妻兮忽仳離
How can I discover if my parents are alive or dead?	父與母兮生死安可知
Beacon fires rise up on all sides, with the thunder of war-drums, <sup>46</sup>	狼煙四起兮沸鼓鞞
Here are forests of spears and arrows, and battle-standards galore.	鋒鏑成林兮盛旌旗
The common people suffer as cities are destroyed,	人民塗炭兮城郭壞
Ritual and justice are ruined while laws are trampled on.	禮義滅亡兮法度隳

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<sup>45</sup> This mirrors the famous opening lines of the “Hujia shibapai” attributed to Cai Yan, which in turn modelled itself on the “Tuyuan” 兔爰 (The Hare Moved Carefully) from the *Book of Odes*; see *Mao Shi zhengyi*, 262-264 [Mao no. 70].

<sup>46</sup> The original text gives this line as *gupin* 鼓鞞 which does not make sense. I read this as *gupi* 鼓鞞, meaning large and small war-drums.

I find myself abandoned in one corner of the world,	身流落兮天一涯
My heart breaking, my mind overwhelmed by distress.	腸欲絕兮心孔悲
The mountains may crumble, the rivers may run dry,	山可平兮河可塞
But my bitter sorrows will never come to an end.	妾怨苦兮無窮期
Here the rebels congregate, here these tigers roar,	蜂蟻屯聚兮豺虎嗥
Their hearts are filled with evil and their bodies reek.	心毒狠兮體腥臊
In roiling clouds of smoke and dust, people scatter and hide,	煙塵瀕洞兮人竄逃
On the cold plain the bones of their victims are covered by weeds.	寒沙暴骨兮沒蓬蒿
All alone I met this time of trouble, and we have suffered much, <sup>47</sup>	亡家遇亂[兮]傷吾曹
Virtue matters; but my life is of as little consequence as a swan's feather. <sup>48</sup>	義重命輕兮如鴻毛
I swore to put an end to this life, hoping not to be raped,	誓捐此生兮期弗辱
I look up at the sky, then down at the earth, the only one to be so upset.	仰天俯地兮獨煩勞
The wise and good have been abandoned, the wicked and stupid are in charge,	棄賢俊兮逐兇愚
Everywhere is in turmoil, and nowhere can I find peace.	東西轉徙兮無寧居
Greed and licentiousness reign, people are killed for fun,	貪淫是樂兮殺戮是娛
So much has been plundered [by the rebels] they leave a wasteland when they pass.	所以剽掠兮所過為墟

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<sup>47</sup> The particle *xi* 兮 is missing from this line in the original text.

<sup>48</sup> This refers to the famous saying from the biography of Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145-ca. 86 BCE), given in *Hanshu* 62:2732, that the deaths of some people are as weighty as Mt. Tai, while others are as light as a swan's feather.

They rob the graves, they burn the houses to the ground,	發墳墓兮焚燬室廬
Gentle girls are captured and dragged off.	閨門孱弱兮被虜驅
They let their lives go in the cause of righteousness, destroying their delicate bodies, <sup>49</sup>	舍生取義兮捐微軀
Who says that women are not as good as men? <sup>50</sup>	誰云女婦兮丈夫弗如
Wherever I go, whenever I sit still, I remember my old home,	行處坐處兮思念我鄉曲
In whatever corner of the world I find myself, I do not see my family!	地角天涯兮不見我骨肉
My parents-in-law are dead, our family is ruined,	姑亡舅歿兮家傾覆
In running away to hide, I ended up being taken captive.	逃竄苟活兮被驅逐
Separated from my husband, when will we meet again?	伉儷離背兮何時復
Luckily I have avoided being raped.	幸茲陋軀兮得免污辱
Who will be the noble gentleman who spends the money [to ransom me]?	誰爲義士兮揮金玉
Perhaps as my song travels, someone will think to buy me free. <sup>51</sup>	歌行路兮妾身贖

In “The Tale of Luanluan,” the wish expressed in the final couplet of the fourth poem does indeed come true—Liu Ying receives her poem and goes to buy his wife’s freedom from captivity. But this set of poems does something more; the character of Zhao Luanluan moves away from

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<sup>49</sup> This line reworks the famous line from the *Mengzi* 孟子 (Mencius) which casts *yi* 義 (righteousness) as more important than *sheng* 生 (life); see Yang Bojun 2005: 265 [11.10 “Gaozi shang” 告子上].

<sup>50</sup> This kind of rhetoric is common in accounts of female martyrs during late imperial warfare; see for example Chen Xianzhang, 4:39a-40b [“Ziqian Xiao jiefu mu fu” 止遷蕭節婦墓賦].

<sup>51</sup> *Jiandeng yuhua*, 2:42-43.

being a mere victim, and becomes a witness to important historical events, and an agent in her own fate. The trauma of the events she has lived through are transmuted into eloquent poetic lines, which allow the protagonist to explore the experiences of women in conflict zones, the dangers and confusions of this situation, while the narrative framing in “The Tale of Luanluan” provides a happy ending—unlike so many women, Zhao Luanluan will survive to be successfully reunited with her beloved husband. That this represents only a temporary reprieve does not matter, for as the second and third songs of the “Four Songs for a Sad Flute” makes clear, the main protagonist has already accepted that like other female martyrs at a time of dynastic collapse, she too will ultimately place righteousness and virtue over personal survival.

## Conclusion

During the late imperial era, a great deal of Tang dynasty poetry by women was created. In some instances texts were deliberately faked; in others, promoters of women’s education and female literacy sought so desperately to recover women’s writings that they were not as careful as they should have been—there are cases where genuine women poets had spurious works added to their oeuvre; where the writings of men in a female voice were simply assumed to be authored by women; and where previously unattributed Tang dynasty poems were corralled together and attributed to a female authorship, sometimes to a historical individual and sometimes to an invented persona.<sup>52</sup> In recent years, some scholars have begun to recognize that the creation of the corpus of verse attributed to the Tang dynasty courtesan ‘Zhao Luanluan’ represents a misattribution, and that these

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<sup>52</sup> For a detailed study of misattributions to women poets found in the *Quan Tangshi*, including a brief overview of the problems concerning ‘Zhao Luanluan’ and ‘Cao Wenji’; see Chen Shangjun 2010.

texts are ultimately derived from an early Ming dynasty work of fiction. While the problems that bedevil Ming and Qing dynasty anthologies of women's literature are increasingly well-known, what has been less appreciated is the scope of the misattributions to be found in literature of this period. Many works of late imperial era fiction have poetry scattered through their pages, attributed to the authorship of both the male and female characters. All too often these poems have been excerpted and reprinted in other texts as writings attributed not to the original author, but to the character portrayed in the novel or short story. This is problematic in the case of fictional characters, but it is in some ways worse in the case of genuine historical individuals that have appeared in fictionalized form. Far too many scholars have been happy to accept these new works, which are effectively forgeries, into the corpus of the poets they study without questioning the attribution. This in turn means that our understanding of their works has suffered significant distortion and falsification.

In the case of "The Tale of Luanluan," this text includes two remarkably fine sequences of poems. If they are correctly attributed to Li Changqi, we lose the character of Zhao Luanluan, the Yuan dynasty gentlewoman, and the Tang courtesan 'Zhao Luanluan', but gain a more accurate appreciation of the talent and originality of this Ming dynasty literatus, and his place in late imperial era literature. For the earlier "Shuxian zhuan," we lose the character of the Song courtesan Cao Wenji, and her Tang courtesan doppelganger, but gain a better understanding of the role of poetry in developing characterization within Liu Fu's short stories. Likewise, in the case of the "Zhang Hongqiao zhuan," an attribution of the poems to Wu Dazhen means we lose the character of Zhang Hongqiao, and the fictionalized 'Lin Hong' and 'Wang Cheng', but gain much enhanced appreciation of the author's interest in creating representations of sexual passion within a companionate marriage. Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of the research that went into this paper is the discovery that the creation of fictional characters for writings to be attributed to



continues up to the present day. The forces that created the misattribution of the Zhao Luanluan poems to a courtesan appear to have been as strong now as they were in the early 1600s.

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