


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Poetry, Intimacy, and Male Fidelity: The Marriage of Wang Caiwei and Sun Xingyan

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Abstract

One of the young couples that exemplified the “perfect match” marriage in Qing history, Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 and Wang Caiwei 王采薇 left behind personal records that give us a glimpse into the intimate world they created, from intellectually stimulating post-marriage courtship, to mourning and pledge of fidelity when Wang Caiwei died. Analyzing this record in the contexts of the Qing literati glorification of “perfect match” marriage and the couple’s familial and social lives, this article pieces together a personal story about youthful passion and love and considers questions about the shapes of emotion and marital companionship and the ways the young couple navigated emotional and social complexities in their pursuit of an ideal companionship.

Keywords: marriage; gender; late imperial China; poetry

In the fall of 1776, Wang Caiwei 王采薇 (1753–1776) died of illness after five years of marriage. Typically, an educated bereaved husband would remarry in a year’s time, following the observance of one-year of ritual mourning for a wife. Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 (1753–1818), at the age of twenty-four *sui*, however, vowed not to marry another woman. He was one of the growing, though still small, number of men in Qing history who rejected remarriage in honor of a beloved wife. It was a radical act because social norms prescribed fidelity only for women, not for men.

This phenomenon constitutes part of a much larger, persistent, and conspicuous movement toward celebrating—and even glorifying—marital companionship set in motion in late Ming.¹ Marital companionship, which was deeply rooted in Chinese

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¹A growing body of scholarship has contributed to this understanding. Dorothy Ko’s 1994 study of the seventeenth-century women’s culture in Jiangnan, for example, provides the first in-depth look into the “companionate marriage” between intellectually compatible couples. Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). More recently, using the elegiac biographies men wrote of their late wives, Martin Huang has explored the intimate voices of bereaved husbands as well as the male construction of womanhood and male self-representation. Huang, *Intimate Memory: Gender and Mourning in Late Imperial China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018). In *Arranged Companions*, I examine the origins of

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cultural discourse, became much more essential to the meanings of marriage both as an idea and as lived experience for the literati. As historians and literary scholars have demonstrated, educated men and women in the Qing embraced a range of innovative practices for expressing and communicating marital affection. The integration of spousal mourning and marital commemoration into social life, the popularization of conjugal poetry and emergence of the genre of *yiyu* (words of remembrance), and the expansion and diversification of intimate spaces for conjugal bonding, among other developments, unequivocally defined a new age in the history of marriage in imperial China.² Never had the educated elite in China's imperial history displayed such passion for marital bonding and devotion.

Qing sources reveal a fluid cultural space in which different kinds of marital bonding thrived.³ In renowned literary circles, the “perfect match” (*jia'ou* 嘉偶) marriage ideal, one where an affectionate relationship is formed based on intellectual and artistic sharing, held particular appeal among aspiring young men and women.⁴ Concentrated in the late-Ming lower Yangzi region, the “perfect match” marriage gained traction in the subsequent centuries, spreading across the empire, although the lower Yangzi remained the center of the fervent activities promoting the “perfect match” ideal and shaping its representation. The celebration of marital devotion and affection ran counter to the orthodox ritual that defined the significance of marriage exclusively in moral and familial terms, affirming implicitly that companionship between two individuals was no less significant; it, too, was fundamental to marriage.

The marriage of Sun Xingyan and Wang Caiwei encapsulates this historical change. Coming of age at the peak of the prosperous High Qing, the couple was among a cluster of high profile “perfect matches” that ascended the cultural stage, among them Hao

the idea of marital companionship in Chinese history and shows how it became widely embraced by the educated during the early and High Qing. See Weijing Lu, *Arranged Companions: Marriage and Intimacy in Qing China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021). Other studies have explored various aspects of marital relationships in the late imperial period. See, for example, Janet Theiss, “Love in a Confucian Climate: The Perils of Intimacy in Eighteenth-Century China,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 11.2 (2009), 197–233; Xiaorong Li, “Singing in Dis/Harmony in Times of Chaos: Xu Can's Poetic Exchange with Her Husband Chen Zhilin during the Ming-Qing Transition,” *Jindai Zhongguo funüshi yanjiu*, no. 19 (2011), 215–54; Sufeng Xu, “Domesticating Romantic Love during the High Qing Classical Revival: The Poetic Exchanges between Wang Zhaoyuan (1763–1851) and Her Husband Hao Yixing (1757–1829),” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 15.2 (2013), 219–64; Allan H. Barr, “Marriage and Mourning in Early-Qing Tributes of Wives,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 15.1 (2013), 137–78; Weijing Lu, “Writing Love: The Heming Ji by Wang Zhaoyuan and Hao Yixing,” in *Gender and Chinese History: Transformative Encounters*, edited by Beverly Bossler (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 83–109.

²Huang, *Intimate Memories*, 28–36; Lu, *Arranged Companions*, chapter 2.

³The “perfect match” marriage model aside, relationships thrived on performing more conventional roles in fulfilling household responsibilities as well. See Barr, “Marriage and Mourning,” 138, and Lu, *Arranged Companions*, 74, and chapter 6.

⁴Scholars have termed this type of marriage “companionate marriage,” a concept adopted from Western scholarship in which it was defined by such qualities as “affection, equality, and mutuality” and romantic love was regarded as the “necessary condition for marriage.” Despite some shared features, the Chinese notion of “jia ou” differed from companionate marriage in important ways. For example, the husband and wife relationship in China was hierarchal rather than equal and romantic love was not a “necessary foundation for marriage.” See Lu, *Arranged Companions*, 12–13. It must be noted that this type of marriage was not universally practiced. Marital companionship was nurtured and exhibited in different ways even among the well-educated. See Barr, “Marriage and Mourning”; Lu, *Arranged Companions*, 74.

Yixing 郝懿行 and Wang Zhaoyuan 王照圓, Wang Tan 王曇 and Jin Liying 金禮羸, Sun Yuanxiang 孫原湘 and Xi Peilan 席佩蘭, Wang Qisun 王芑孫 and Cao Zhenxiu 曹貞秀, Xu Dayuan 徐達源 and Wu Qiongxian 吳瓊仙, and Ren Zhaolin 任兆麟 and Zhang Yunzi 張允滋.⁵ This was arguably the most exuberant moment for “perfect match” marriages as leading literati lavished praise on these exemplary couples, and educated young men and women themselves consciously fashioned their relationship in the image of the “perfect match” model. Today’s reader can get a glimpse into a “perfect match” marriage through reading *Fusheng liu ji* (Six records of a life adrift), a memoir written by Shen Fu 沈復, a contemporary of Sun Xingyan and Wang Caiwei. Shen Fu’s personal account, a rare type of historical source in the genre of “yiyu,” detailed his marital relationship replete with joy, pleasure, disappointment, and sadness in his twenty-three years of marriage to Yun with all the struggles—family tensions, hardships, and tragedies—derived in large part from the conflict between the changing culture valorizing conjugal love and the patriarchal system. Sun Xingyan and Wang Caiwei’s case offers a complementary yet different perspective from that of Shen Fu’s into the High Qing “perfect match” marriage. The key difference is that, unlike Shen Fu and Yun, who were virtually unknown beyond their immediate social circles, Sun Xingyan and Wang Caiwei belonged to the established social elite and were well connected to the fervent champions of “perfect match” marriage such as Yuan Mei 袁枚. Their marriage was highly acclaimed in their own time and idolized from the time of their deaths through the rest of the dynasty. This positioning placed their marriage at the center of the thriving culture that drove the “perfect match” discourse and practices.

Sun Xingyan and Wang Caiwei left behind different kinds of records from Shen Fu’s memoir, the majority of which are in the form of poetry. Poetry may lack the smooth and consistent narrative of a memoir, but this constraint is richly compensated by the immediacy of the voices of poetry, most of which were produced through the years of their marriage and in which Wang Caiwei spoke directly to her readers rather than being mediated through the voice of her husband. Additionally, poetry was a more conventional genre of conjugal writing. Their case, consequently, was much more representative of the modes of conjugal expression, interaction, and commemoration that the Qing literati favored.

With their rich and gendered connotations, the writings of Wang Caiwei and Sun Xingyan have the distinctive power to reveal how “perfect match” marriages played out in the lives of a key segment of the young men and women who happened to come from the upper echelon of the educated elite. Their accounts, as fragmentary as they are, give us with the most direct access to the couple’s intimate world, the familial and social environments they constantly navigated, and the personal meanings of companionship created in the process. In this story of youthful love, grieving, and devotion, what is most revealing is perhaps the power of talented women that shaped the “perfect match” marriage ideal. The main protagonist here was Sun Xingyan, but it was Wang Caiwei who exerted the lasting impact on their relationships.

A “Perfect Match” from Changzhou

Eighteenth-century Changzhou, where both Sun Xingyan and Wang Caiwei came from, boasted a sophisticated literati culture. Located in the core of the lower Yangzi region,

⁵See Xu, “Domesticating Romantic Love,” and Lu, “Writing Love”; for the marriages of Wang/Jin, Sun/Xi, and Wang/Cao, see Lu, *Arranged Companions*.

the economic and cultural heartland of the late empire, the prefecture was a nourishing ground for young talent and the birthplace of a large number of women poets.⁶ Local tradition emphasized pride in cherishing and educating daughters, and it is not surprising that it was in this hubbub of literati culture where the new ideal of “perfect match” marriage thrived.

Wang Caiwei was born into an upper-class family. Her father, Guangxi, held a *jinshi* degree and served as a magistrate for many years. Although lacking a illustrious public career, he succeeded in raising highly educated children, daughters and sons alike (one of his sons would earn a *jinshi* degree). He described the teenager Caiwei, his beloved fourth daughter:

She had a beautiful appearance and gentle disposition. She was deeply interested in literature and history and would not let books leave her hands. She was especially skilled in small character calligraphy and loved reading and writing poetry. I thought that poetry was not proper for women, and so I hid those books. She liked to be very neat. By a bright window and clean desk, she read, practiced calligraphy by *lintie* 臨帖 (imitating a model script), made a cup of tea, and picked flowers for decoration. She frequently read about Daoism and texts about immortals. I exhorted her seriously, and she then stopped. But she was endowed with a sensible nature [for religious enlightenment] and harbored the desire for transcendence.⁷

Although Guangxi warned Caiwei to stay away from books about the supernatural, he himself was a devout believer in the supernatural in a different form: divination. When Caiwei was still a little girl, he put his divination skills into searching for an ideal future son-in-law. He came across the birth information of Sun Xingyan, at the time a six-year-old, and was convinced of the little boy’s great potential for the examinations. He sent a betrothal proposal to the Sun family, and Caiwei and Xingyan wed in 1771, when both were 19 *sui*.⁸

It was, as happened so often with elite families that adored their daughters, an uxori-local marriage, whereby Sun Xingyan moved in with his bride’s family.⁹ Aside from the benefit of keeping a beloved daughter home for a few more years, this arrangement also made strategic sense given the more favorable learning environment at the Wang’s. Xingyan’s family boasted top degree holders among its recent ancestors, but its fortune

⁶Jiang Qingbo’s study of the prominent families in Southern Jiangsu, of which Changzhou was a center, provides a detailed account of the region’s cultural achievement, including producing many of the Qing’s best known female poets, and the unique socio-economic conditions that propelled this success. Jiang Qingbo 江庆柏, *Ming Qing Su’nan wangzu wenhua yanjiu* 明清苏南望族文化研究 (Nanjing: Nanjing shifan daxue, 1999). The generations of women from the Zhang family, chronicled by Susan Mann, offer an example of the talent this locality nurtured. See Susan Mann, *The Talented women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁷Wang Guangxie, “Wang nü Wang Caiwei xiaozhuan.” *Changli ge ji* (hereafter *CLGJ*), 379. In *Jiangnan nüxing bieji* 江南女性别集, compiled by Hu Xiaoming 胡晓明 and Peng Guozhong 彭国忠 (Hefei: Huangshan Shushe, 20140), vol. 4, shang.

⁸Zhang Shaonan, 张绍南, *Sun Yuanru xiansheng nianpu* (Beijing tushuguan zhenben nianpu congkan), 119: 448. Wang’s father dated the engagement at eight years of age for Wang.

⁹See Weijing Lu, “Uxorilocal Marriage among Qing Literati,” *Late Imperial China* 19.2 (1998), 64–110. Changzhou in particular was a popular region for uxori-local marriage. See Susan Mann, *Talented Women of the Zhang Family*.

had declined somewhat. He had been studying under the tutelage of his father, who served as a *jiaoyu* 教諭 (school director) in Jurong county in Southern Jiangsu. In his uxorial residence, Xingyan continued his endeavors for the examinations. He enrolled in a local academy, Longcheng, and later the Zhongshan Academy in Nanjing. He progressed rapidly, passing the county examination just a year after the wedding.

However, Sun Xingyan was far from fully preoccupied with examination responsibilities. He socialized extensively and was deeply into writing poetry, much to the chagrin of his father-in-law.¹⁰ His first try at the provincial exam failed. The following year, he took leave of his father-in-law's household and moved into his parents' residence in Jurong with Caiwei and their infant daughter. Only a little more than a year and half after their relocation, Wang Caiwei was afflicted by illness after giving birth to their second daughter. She returned to her parents' home for care, where she died shortly after at the age of twenty-four *sui* in 1776. The couple's two little girls also passed not long after their mother.

Sun Xingyan would survive his wife for forty-two years. His government career took off after he passed the metropolitan examinations in 1787 with distinction, ranking second place on the palace examination. His appointment to the Hanlin Academy was followed by several posts at the court and outside the capital, and that service earned him a reputation for being a capable and uncorrupt official. His main accomplishments, however, were in scholarship—he was highly revered as a leading evidential scholar. He did not take another wife, but did take concubines after reaching 40 years of age, reportedly at the urging of his grandmother.

Both Wang Caiwei and Sun Xingyan had collections of works that secured their literary/scholarly legacies. Caiwei's poems were first compiled by her father into a small volume titled *Weige oucun* 薇閣偶存 (Casually preserved works from the Pavilion of Bracken) shortly after her death.¹¹ A separate volume that Xingyan put together, *Changlige ji* 長離閣集 (Collection from the Pavilion of Eternal Departing), appeared a few years later.¹² The current augmented version of *Changlige ji* contains 78 poems, although over 200 poems were said to have been extant at the time of Caiwei's death.¹³ Sun's collected works, some of which he compiled and others compiled posthumously, included both poetry and prose writing and scholarly treatises. His eight-volume collection of poetry, *Fangmaoshanren shi lu* 芳茂山人詩錄 (Recorded poetry by the mountain dweller Fangmao), was by no means exhaustive. According to Bi

¹⁰Poetry was a standard component of the civil examinations in the Tang and Song periods, but it was removed from the exams from the early Ming onward. Emperor Qianlong restored a poetry question in 1756 to "make examinations more difficult for the increasing numbers of classically literate candidates." Benjamin A. Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 8. Even with this policy change, poetry was not key to examinations success, and as Elman points out, "examination policy never hindered the popularity of poetry and literary flair among literati groups, which demonstrates the cultural limits of the classical curriculum in influencing intellectual life." *Ibid.* 3.

¹¹In his anthology, Kong Guangsen's preface was titled "Guxiu Wang Weiyu Yuzhen ji xu." This suggests that *Changlige li* or *Weige ou cun* was initially also called *Yuzhen ji* 玉珍集. Yuzhen was Caiwei's courtesy name. Kong, *Piantiwen* (xixiu siku quanshu edition), 1476: 382.

¹²According to Gong Qing, a son-in-law of Sun's brother and the compiler of couple's collected works, *Changlige ji* first appeared in Bi Yuan compiled *Wuhui ying cai ji*, which was published in the 1780s. Gong Qing, "Postscript." *CLGJ*, 377.

¹³Gong Qing, "Postscript." *CLGJ*, 377. Gong's postscript recorded some of Caiwei's fragmentary stanzas.

Yuan 畢沅 (1730–1797), after taking interest in philology in his late twenties, Sun “discarded his poems, and those that have been preserved count only one in a hundred.”¹⁴

The couple’s literary stature can be inferred from the remarks of the most influential critics of their time. Fa Shishan 法式善 called Caiwei “a truly extraordinary talent [*qicai* 奇才] of the women’s quarters.”¹⁵ Yuan Mei (1716–1797) characterized Caiwei’s *yuefu* style poems as “sentimental and strikingly beautiful, crisp, pure, and elegant” (*ai gan wan yan dingdang qing yi* 哀感頑艷, 丁當清逸).¹⁶ Hong Liangji 洪亮吉, a close friend of Sun Xingyan, described her poems using the metaphor of a late spring scene: “Like fallen green leaves and scattered red petals, they are tremendously sentimental and captivating.”¹⁷ Hu Shi, the modern scholar who deemed most works of Qing female poets to be “worthless,” regarded Caiwei as an exception.¹⁸

Caiwei’s reputation as a poet was perhaps cemented most powerfully by the inclusion of her work in the otherwise all-male anthology *Wuhui yingcai ji* 吳會英才集 (Poetry anthology by the talents from the Wu region) compiled in the 1780s by Bi Yuan, governor-general and a patron of scholarship whose mother happened to be a reputed poet. Aiming to showcase the young talents of the culturally vibrant region, Bi selected poems from eleven local youth, Sun Xingyan included, but he had difficulty finding another equally bright young man to complete his list and decided to include Caiwei. This was such an unconventional move that Wang Chang 王昶, who had been invited to write a preface, was displeased. He declined the invitation after Caiwei’s inclusion, saying “there is no such precedent.”¹⁹ What is noteworthy about Wang Caiwei’s selection is its symbolism. It not only signified a groundbreaking recognition of the literary stature of a female poet, but also served as a signpost of the ascendance of the “perfect match” marriage ideal. Placing Sun Xingyan and Wang Caiwei side by side in this influential anthology, the volume played a significant part in propelling the “perfect match” marriage.

Sun’s zest for poetry waned as he turned his interests to evidential scholarship, but he had nonetheless built a reputation of being a great talent in his youth. He had been called one of the “Seven Talents of Piling (Changzhou),” a group of Changzhou’s bright young men who would claim empire-wide fame in the years to come that also included Hong Liangji, Huang Jingren 黃景仁, Zhao Huaiyu 趙懷玉, Yang Lun 楊倫, Lü Xingyuan 呂星垣, and Xu Shushou 徐書受.²⁰ His poems were prized for their unconventional and unrestrictive style (*yi qiyi sheng ren* 以奇逸勝人), and he was known for his quick and sharp mind in literary composition (*cai si min jie, xia bi qian yan* 才思敏捷下筆千言).²¹ Yuan Mei, Sun’s biggest advocate, called him an

¹⁴Bi, *Wuhui yingcai ji* (Qingdai zhuanjia congkan edition), 159: 28.

¹⁵Fa Shishan, *Wumen shihua* (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 1705: 124.

¹⁶Yuan Mei, “Sun Weiyang qi Wang ruren muzhiming.” *CLGJ*, 383.

¹⁷Hong Liangji, *Beijing shihua* (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 1705: 4. Hong suspected that Sun might have helped edit Caiwei’s work; he nonetheless admitted that when it comes to her distinct “dark, mysterious and dreamy” flavor, even Sun wouldn’t be able to come up with it. *Ibid.*, 1705: 13.

¹⁸Ouyang Zhesheng 歐陽哲生, comp., *Hu Shi wencun* (Beijing: Beijing Daxue, 1998), 590.

¹⁹Wang Chang, *Huhai shizhuan* 湖海詩傳 (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 1626: 343. Wang mistakenly stated that Bi’s complete list included ten poets. The actual number of the poets included was twelve.

²⁰For “Piling qizi,” see *Qingshi gao* 清史稿 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 13391. In *Beijing shihua*, Hong Liangji noted that Sun’s “poetic talent was ranked the first among his peers when he was young.” Hong Liangji, *Beijing shihua*, 1705: 5.

²¹Shi Yunyu, “Fangmao shanren shilu xu” 芳茂山人詩錄序, in *Sun Yuanru xiansheng quanji* (hereafter SYXQ, Qingdai shiwenji huibian edition), 436: 267; 射燕樓詩話, juan 20.

“extraordinary talent” (*qicai* 奇才), noting that the world had many “refined talents” (*qingcai* 清才) but extraordinary talents were few.²² He believed Sun’s poetic caliber to be in the company of the Tang greats Han Yu and Lu Tong.²³ Sun’s abandonment of poetic endeavor to embrace evidential scholarship thus caused lasting disappointment for Yuan.²⁴

Intellectual Companionship

The most culturally acclaimed genre for expressing *qing* (feeling, emotion), poetry was fashioned to be the main vehicle for communication between married couples by the time of the couple’s marriage.²⁵ As with other “perfect match” husbands and wives, Wang Caiwei and Sun Xingyan wrote frequently in the forms of “harmonizing each other’s poems” (*changhe* 倡和) and “sending a poem to a spouse” (*jinei/jiwai* 寄內/寄外, meaning “send to my wife/husband”). What is noteworthy is that, unlike most female poets, Wang Caiwei avoided the conventional term addressing one’s own husband, *wai* (“the outside one”) in her conjugal poetry. She consistently used Sun Xingyan’s literary names, Jiqu and Weiyin, instead. This was, without a doubt, a conscious choice on her part. Addressing one another with literary names, a common practice among educated males, conveyed a sense of closeness and equality. In choosing a somewhat masculine form to address her husband, Caiwei purposefully deemphasized her gender identity to project a relationship between equals.

Few writings from their wedding in 1771 have survived. One direct source on their early days of marriage is a short biography that Sun Xingyan composed years later in 1806. That year, thanks to Sun’s promotion to the third rank, the imperial court conferred the title of *furen* 夫人 on Caiwei (the highest of the titles conferred on the mother or wife of a government official). Sun had written a “record of conduct” of Caiwei at the time of her death, but it was later lost. He therefore wrote the biography to “leave something for the descendants to remember.”²⁶ Sun’s memory may have faded with the lapse of time, but those details he remembered after all those years were no doubt among his most cherished:

My wife and her sisters were all literate and good at calligraphy. A few days after our wedding, she asked me to compose song lyric [*ci*] poetry and play chess with her. I had learned neither how to write *ci* nor play chess and felt rather ashamed. I thereupon studied the *ci* composition in order to answer her invitation, but I never succeeded in learning how to play chess with her. All day long she held a book in her hand and taught her younger sister in their room. From time to time she practiced calligraphy by *lintie*, and she especially loved the Yu Shinan style. She copied for me my poems [in the Yu style], some of which are still kept in my chest. She once said that *ci* poems from the Tang and the Five Dynasties period could all be played with flute and panpipe according to their tune and rhythm. On a quiet night in late spring, she would play a flute to the tune of Li Yu’s song lyric “Outside the Curtains the Rain is Murmuring” and ask me to listen to it carefully. At the stanza “Spring is gone like blossoms fallen on flowing water, My paradise

²²See Sun Xingyan, “Suiyuan suibi xu” 隨園隨筆序, SYXQ, 436: 234.

²³Yuan Mei, “Sun Weiying qi Wang ruren muzhiming.” CLGJ, 383–84.

²⁴For the exchange of letters between the two on this matter, see SYXQ, 436: 117–18.

²⁵Lu, *Arranged Companions*, 21, 66–67; 170.

²⁶Sun Xingyan, “Gao zeng furen wangqi Wangshi shizhuan” 誥贈夫人亡妻王氏事狀, CLGJ, 382.

too,” everyone was moved to tears. Later on I made a posthumous painting of her, entitling it *Fallen Blossoms and Flowing Water*. That was why.²⁷

By his own admission, Sun Xingyan was taken by his bride’s talent immediately after the wedding. Such detailed descriptions almost allow us to visualize the delicate initial interactions between the two, who had probably never met before. There was a hint of competition, but the acts mostly suggest cautious testing on the part of the bride. There were careful gestures of courtship with the books, musical instrument, chess, and calligraphy acting as the medium. Wang Caiwei appears quite comfortable in this account. This partly has to do with the fact that they were living in her home, but one can also sense her confidence in her ability to win over the respect and affection of her husband.

In an unassuming manner, Wang Caiwei quickly made an impression on Sun Xingyan. She came to exercise considerable intellectual influence on him beyond learning of the art of *ci* writing or music appreciation. Sun wrote poems profusely throughout their marriage, and Caiwei was a major inspiration for his literary creativity. A distinctive feature of his conjugal poems is their romantic and other-worldly tone. For example, this poem, entitled “ADMIRING THE MOON, IN RESPONSE TO MY WIFE,” is replete with images of immortals and the quest for transcendence such as this part:

The floating cloud is like a tall raft,
 An immortal goes through it.
 I wish I could ascend the sky
 Holding your hand to call on Chang E [嫦娥] ...
 The blue mountain loves youth,
 Let us go visit the Daoist sage and waste no more time.
 The moon has been full thousands of times,
 A hundred years goes by in great speed.
 Empty glory is not worth cherishing,
 It may have already done harm to our body and mind.
 With you, my heart is [as firm as] gold and rock,
 To the realm of the immortals we make our pledge.²⁸

Sun Xingyan sounds like a great enthusiast of mythical and Daoist themes, but he probably took up this new interest only after marriage.²⁹ Wang Caiwei, who had been into Daoist teachings all along, drew her groom into her spiritual world. “*Dao shu*” (Daoist texts) were a prominent presence in their boudoir, which Sun describes; in one poem, for example, Caiwei is depicted as falling sleep with a Daoist text in her hand.³⁰ Their interest in matters of immortals may have also molded their poetry styles. Contemporaries noted that Caiwei’s poetry was close to that of the Tang poet Li He while Xingyan’s to Han Yu. Both Li He and Han Yu were great mid-Tang poets known for their imagination, boldness, and unconventionality.³¹

²⁷Sun Xingyan, “Gao zeng furen wangqi Wangshi shizhuan,” 381.

²⁸SYXQ, 283.

²⁹Sun indicates that he became interested in idea of immortality in his youth. See “Ti ‘Caizhitu” 題采芝圖, SYXQ, 436: 349.

³⁰Sun Xingyan, “Chou ye” 愁夜, “Ji nei” 寄內, SYXQ, 436: 287, 354.

³¹Fa Shishan 法式善 characterized Caiwei’s poetry style as having merged those of Le He’s and Weng Tingyun’s. *Wumen shihua* 梧門詩話 (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 1705: 124; also see Wang Qishu 王啓淑,

From their initial artistic and intellectual activities, the couple's interactions moved toward the male-dominated realm of scholarship. Sun's biographical sketch of Caiwei describes that later in their marriage:

We got hold of the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 by Xu Shen by chance, and my wife made a plan with me: we would learn a few dozen words everyday. After a long time, I thereupon became versed in philology. In our mountain residence there were tung, cassia, and old cypress trees. On a moonlit night of the cold winter, the shadows of the trees faced one another, looking rather chilled. We would either get out of the house to chant poems leisurely or burn incense and open books to discuss history. Her insights were extraordinary.³²

At the time Sun Xingyan put down these words, he had already been recognized for his scholarly stature in philological studies. Looking back to that intellectual journey, he credited his wife for initiating an important early step.

Wang Caiwei's wide ranging intellectual curiosity was seen again in her love for reading and discussing history with Sun. She seemed to have never failed to impress him with her unconventional discernment. One of her comments Sun noted involved a Han dynasty righteous official named Wang Zhang and his wife, whose endurance of poverty as a young couple became a symbol of shared struggles and aspirations for educated Qing youth. According to the *Han History*, Wang Zhang was a student studying in the capital when he nearly died of illness in poverty. With only a "cow coat" to cover his body, he wept and bid his farewell to his wife. She reprimanded him: "Zhongqin [his courtesy name]! Of the nobles in the capital and in the court, who is better than you? Now you are sick and poor, yet you do not exhort yourself; instead you cry. How despicable!" Wang Zhang, in the end, rose to be a high-ranking court official. But when he wanted to submit a memorial to the emperor, his wife objected because she foresaw the risks, telling him that he should be content and reminding him of the days he cried under the cover of the "cow coat." He dismissed her advice; consequently, he died in jail, and his wife and children were exiled.³³ This is one of those stories in early Chinese history in which a woman was praised not for her moral virtue but for her wisdom. Wang Caiwei, however, believed that Wang Zhang's wife should not have tried to stop her husband from submitting the memorial. That act, she argued, only showed she was, after all, "a timid woman" (Kuangqie nüer 懼怯女兒).³⁴ Wang Caiwei's point was that because Wang Zhang was performing his duty as a Confucian gentleman in service, his wife should have supported him rather than putting self-interest ahead of his public duty. Clearly, in singling out this episode, Sun wanted his readers to see Caiwei not just as a woman of literary talent but an individual with independent mind, inner strength, and moral principles.

The episode apparently left such a deep impression on Sun that he later recalled that conversation as he looked at her portrait:

Shuicao qing xia ju 水曹清暇錄 (Beijing: Beijing guji, 1998), 78. Both Yuan Mei and Hong Liangji compared Sun Xingyan's poetry to that of Han Yu. Hong Liangji, *Beijiang shihua*, 31; Yuan Mei, "Sun Weiying qi Wang ruren muzhimin," *CLGJ*, 383.

³²*CLGJ*, 381.

³³*Han Shu* (Beijing: zhonghua shuju), 3238–39.

³⁴Yuan Mei, "Sun Weiying qi Wang ruren muzhimin." *CLGJ*, 383. Also See Zhao Huaiyu 趙懷玉, "Sun Jichou qi Wangshi kuangming" 孫季仇妻王氏壙銘 *CLGJ*, 385; Sun, "Shan xi chou shi" 山夕酬詩, *SYXQ*, 436: 330.

Looking over the “cow coat,” my tears have not dried.
 On that chilly night, we discuss history under a lonely lamp.
 Facing you, thinking of the Wang Zhang story, I am ashamed,
 Twice I flipped the justice’s cap in vain.³⁵

At that moment, Sun Xingyan examined his own conduct as an official, remembering the righteous comment by Caiwei. Sun was widely praised as a man of integrity, admired for his refusal to submit to the corrupt yet powerful He Shen. His refusal to compromise his moral principles cost him higher ranking positions. In this poem, he apologizes to Wang Caiwei for his inadequate achievement, but we can also sense at some level his pride in knowing he had lived up to the moral principles she cherished.

Sun’s memories and self-reflections bespoke Wang Caiwei’s enormous influence on their relationship. Clearly, his wife’s talent, learning, intellect, and moral character had a great deal to do with his attraction to her. All were qualities highly respected in a male friend, and Sun may not have anticipated finding such qualities in his young wife. But in the eighteenth century when arts and learning were highly valued in women, it was no longer rare that a bride with sophisticated education and talent played a much more active part in the intellectual life of the married couple than conventional gender norms would permit. What makes this kind of gender dynamic even more remarkable is that Sun was a self-indulgent and arrogant young man. Hong Liangji noted, “At that time, we were young and arrogant. We read a lot of books but had little knowledge about the affairs of the world. Counting on our lofty ambition, we thought that we could be equal to anyone in history and accomplish anything in the world and that we would all achieve great feats someday.”³⁶ Remarkably, the arrogant young Sun willingly conceded to his bride.

Navigating through Challenges

The stimulating literary and scholarly activities constituted a major area around which their “perfect match” marriage evolved, but it was just one facet of their daily interactions. Like all married couples in upper-class households, which were typically multi-generational and/or polygynous, their marital life was shaped by gender and family systems that were constraining and demanding of deeply intellectual couples. Both wife and husband were expected to perform gendered familial and social roles. For Sun, this meant establishing a career by earning higher examinations degrees, the gateway to office-holding, and for Caiwei, performing the tasks of wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. Under the Confucian gender system, moreover, men and women led different social lives. Elite women were largely cloistered at home, while their male folks engaged in all kinds of social activities. All these forces created complex realities a married couple had to navigate. Reading some of the writing of Wang Caiwei and Sun Xingyan in this context allows us to imagine how gender and familial structures complicated their relationship and how they managed their intimate spaces.

The Wang household, in which the couple spent nearly four years, was polygynous and consisted of nine siblings of Caiwei’s generation, born to a wife and three concubines. A daughter of a concubine, Caiwei was said to be loved by her principal mother

³⁵Sun, “Ti guiren zhen” 題閨人真, SYXQ, 436: 314.

³⁶Hong Liangji, “Lü Guangwen Xingyuan wenchao xu” 呂廣文星垣文鈔序, in *Hong Liangji ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 977–78.

because of her filial demeanor.³⁷ That statement, however, implies the innate disadvantage of being born to a concubine mother. She had to be particularly vigilant in her conduct to secure the affection of the most powerful woman in the family, but her father's doting would have mitigated this problem. Moving into the Sun household in the last year of marriage meant Caiwei had to adapt to a new family. The Sun household, which included two much younger brothers, was presided over by a strong-willed grandmother, a chaste widow who had single-handedly raised her only child (Xingyan's father).³⁸ However, perhaps a sign of Changzhou's culture of valuing female learning or their adoration for their eldest son/grandson, the elderly woman (?) accommodated the couple's habits. Sun noted, "at that time my grandmother was still alive. My parents loved their children and did not impose strict rules. Besides paying respects [to my grandmother and parents] in the morning and evening, she did not do womanly work."³⁹ This leniency spared Caiwei from many of the conventional responsibilities of a young daughter-in-law.

Nonetheless, Caiwei was confronted with considerable psychological and emotional difficulties during this time. Although the uxorilocal residence shielded her from separation from her natal home for a brief period, once she joined her in-laws, Caiwei suffered from severe homesickness, a common psychological condition for young wives married virilocally. The worst emotional trauma came when a close sister suddenly died, and she had no chance of bidding a final farewell. It was said to have contributed to the downturn of her health. She then developed some sort of lung ailment after giving birth to her second daughter. Caiwei's poetry carried a distinctively melancholic air. Understanding her sentimentality in the larger context makes it clear that it was derived not just from a sensitive personality but also from the social and marital institutions young women had little chance of escaping from. Here, one issue was silent in the sources but could have added to her anxiety. A young daughter-in-law was under pressure to give birth to an heir to carry on the family line. In Caiwei's case, such pressure could have been quite intense given that Sun Xingyan was the eldest son/grandson of the family. Giving birth to two daughters in a row would have disappointed not just the matriarch and the in-laws but Caiwei herself.

Sun Xingyan, by contrast, carried none of these gendered burdens. He certainly was facing pressure to succeed, but his family duties, intellectual interests, and social life were integrated to a large degree. He relished socialization regardless of the location of their residence and kept a busy schedule studying, partying, or taking trips far and near with friends like Hong Liangji to explore historical relics. "Not a single day passed without partying," noted his biographer.⁴⁰

Sun's hyperactive social life, it appears, left him in a predicament because of the conflicting demands and needs of his friends and wife. Friendship and conjugal companionship sometimes collided. Hong once described how he waited impatiently for Sun Xingyan to join him for a social event: "My friend is separated from me by a hundred *li*, I wait for him to arrive and yet he has not. ... His sickly wife must be grasping his garment; this mad friend [i.e. Hong himself] will send a letter to urge him again."⁴¹ Pressure from friends tested his devotion to Caiwei, and he might not have always

³⁷ Wang Guangxie, "Wang nǚ Wang Caiwei xiaozhuan." *CLGJ*, 379.

³⁸ Sun Xingyan, "Xu taigongren jiushi shengchen shilue" 許太恭人九十生辰事畧, *SYXQ*, 173.

³⁹ *CLGJ*, 381.

⁴⁰ *Sun Yuanru xiansheng nianpu* 119: 452–3.

⁴¹ Hong Liangji, "Chi Sunda bu zhi" 遲孫大不至, in *Hong Liangji ji*, 2059.

succeeded in resisting the temptations to join his friends. According to her father, Wang Caiwei did not approve of her husband's lifestyle. Wang Guangxie noted: "My son-in-law was very smart and excellent in poetry, and he was unrestrained in his conduct. The locals hailed him as one of its seven talented young men. Proud of his talent, he was not interested in being an examination student who only knew to recite the classics (lit. *jingsheng wuyin tai* 經生吾伊態). Sometimes he drank excessively and sang loudly [i.e. gestures of unrestrained lifestyle]. My daughter often tried to dissuade him. He failed the provincial examination in 1774, and my daughter felt a little depressed."⁴²

It is conceivable that Caiwei would be worried about Xingyan's behavior because excessive socialization took away from studying for the examinations. In their time, competing on the hyper-competitive examinations was hardly a man's job alone. A wife provided practical and emotional support, and if other interests led the husband astray, she would have to delicately shepherd him to stay the course, deploying, for instance, the strategy of keeping him company while she embroidered and he studied.⁴³ Caiwei does not seem to be interested in such a gendered tactic (she didn't do womanly work), and Sun was probably too full of himself to be persuaded to change his behavior.

Sun's social life cast a shadow on Caiwei's emotional wellbeing. A prevalent theme in her poems was loneliness. She wrote that his departure left her with no one to discuss books or her own work: "My silk purse is filled with new poems. When will we be together, leaning on the railing and revising them?"⁴⁴ In another poem, she describes how receiving a letter from him in her sickness instantly lifted her mood.⁴⁵ Longing for him was more than just for intellectual enjoyment; there is a subtle hint of longing for intimacy. "Waking up from a dream, I roll up the curtain, feeling as if you are still here," she wrote.⁴⁶ She may also have been worried that he might develop interest in other women, and sent him a subtle message:

Fragrant mist descends obliquely on the curtain [of the bed],
A coat lies heavily on the quilt.
Birds cry disorderly in my dream,
Sadness is as deep as the fallen flowers.
It is easy to write a letter of a thousand lines,
but it is hard to send a piece of my heart.
If the love of [Sima] Xiangru is firm,
Of what use is [for his wife] to write the "Song of White-Head"?⁴⁷

The "Song of White-head" alludes to a story about the Han dynasty poet Sima Xiangru and his wife Zhou Wenjun, whom he had seduced while she was a widow. Allegedly, Xiangru later wanted to take a concubine, prompting Wenjun to send a poem titled "Song of White-head" that contained this line: "I wish I had a man who shares my heart and who would not part from me even when we are white-headed."⁴⁸

⁴²Wang Guangxie, "Wang nu Wang Caiwei xiaozhuan." *CLGJ*, 379.

⁴³See discussions in Lu, *Arranged Companions*, 102.

⁴⁴Wang Caiwei, "Eryue shiqiri jian Weiyin" 二月十七日東微隱, *CLGJ*, 372.

⁴⁵Wang Caiwei, "Binwo de Jiqiu shi" 病卧得季逖詩, *CLGJ*, 367.

⁴⁶Wang Caiwei, "Ji Jiqiu, shi ke Hezhou" 寄季逖, 時客和州, *CLGJ*, 370.

⁴⁷Wang Caiwei, "Da Weiyin fu ci qian yun" 答微隱復次前韻, *CLGJ*, 370.

⁴⁸Ge Hong 葛洪, *Xijing zaji* 西京雜記 (Xi'an: Sanqin, 2006), 156.

Understanding the familial, social, and personal environments and contexts sheds light on how Wang Caiwei and Sun Xingyan negotiated their roles and developed their marital bonding. The various forces put their commitment to the test and shaped their relationship. There were emotional ups and downs, and, as a young woman, Caiwei had much more to cope with in their relationship. However, dealing with those challenges in the end helped deepen their mutual attachment, and as we shall see, the availability of a culturally esteemed means of conjugal exchange proved to be hugely important as they overcame challenges and found new means to form conjugal bonds.

By the late eighteenth century, writing poems had blossomed into a signature marker of the “perfect match” marriage. For Wang Caiwei and Sun Xingyan, as seen in the earlier discussion, poetry writing was integral to their intellectual life, but it was also essential as a refined means for nurturing and enhancing conjugal companionship. The couple were regularly harmonizing with one another’s poems (*changhe*) at home and sending poems to each other when Sun was away. Caiwei’s *Changlige ji* includes fourteen poems—about one fifth of her extant poems—written as harmonizing or “sending to” pieces, but close examination shows a good number of other poems were conjugal poems as well.

For Caiwei, the act of writing, in a sense, had a psychological function. It was a coping mechanism. The process of organizing the language and deploying literary allusions may even be understood as self-empowering. That literary exercise created a vehicle for crafting subtle messages when other means were unavailable. As gender and seniority placed a young wife at the lower end of the social hierarchy, she was not in a position to complain, at least overtly.

More importantly, poetry writing brought the couple closer together. This was especially significant in a society in which moral teachings discouraged the display of marital intimacy. Framing it as a transgression of the ritual doctrine of “husband and wife difference” and a threat to conjugal harmony, Qing didactic books spoke of marital intimacy with suspicion and disapproval, exhorting married couples to guard against it.⁴⁹ But anchored in the Confucian antiquity and cherished in the cultural traditions through the ages, poetry legitimized expressing conjugal love. Equipped with excellent literary skills, Wang Caiwei and Sun Xingyan conveyed their feelings and marked memories through writing poetry. One autumn night, for example, the couple took a long walk along the bank of the mighty Yangzi and both composed a poem to commemorate the event. The one by Sun reads,

Having tied our boat, we walk into the night’s mist,
 The human world appears remote and separated.
 The moon rises slowly;
 And stars have changed their color.
 My little darling, in the boat, is sick and sleepless,
 Holding hands, we rise to tread on the fog of the creek ahead.
 The wind blows our clothing, leaving a shadow in the deep creek,
 As if standing on the water and walking in [the reflection of] the blue sky.
 The sound of the creek, the sound of the leaves—they are hard to listen to!
 Myriad insects cry, in this night of the autumn cold.
 In the fog-warped house, a clear light emerges,

⁴⁹Lu, *Arranged Companions*, 36–41.

A wind-resistant lantern retreats into the deep dark.
 Cold mountain air penetrates our bones; a light melancholy sets in.
 You and I—let's change into a pair of gulls.
 Tearing the lotus to make garments; wearing the dew,
 We would like to discard our robes to let them flow east.
 The eastward flow is so vast—don't ask why!
 Its currents, like thousands of roof tiles in disarray, send our melancholy away.
 From this moment on, let's make a home on the flowing water, and let
 me accompany my beauty.
 To transcend this world—we better do it now when young.
 The road lit up by the fireflies—its light dimmed in the cold—is in the far distance,
 Chanting poems back and forth, we have already passed the southern bridge.
 The wind carries our sound [over the creek]; startling the travelers to look,
 Across the bank, comes their indistinct whisper.⁵⁰

The elaborate poem gives us a glimpse of an immensely joyful and intimate night. Holding hands, the couple strolled by the vast river, composed poems, and fantasized about their future life (which has a distinct Daoist flavor), submerging themselves in the enchantingly beautiful night that inspires endless imagination. The event probably took place during a family visit between Changzhou and Jurong.⁵¹ According to the poem by Caiwei, the couple walked three *li*, a considerable distance for a woman with bound feet.⁵² The walk was to relieve the ailing Caiwei's insomnia, but it turned out to be a euphoric experience.

The heartfelt joy and imagining of “making a home on the flowing water” may betray another hidden reason that made this kind of event particularly meaningful: living with extended family under the prevailing gender norms that kept women at home, they had few chances to be out alone to enjoy themselves. Visiting family away from their residence offered them rare occasions to be alone.

Facing such constraints, the couple managed to create some space and time for intimate enjoyment, even at home. In their poetry, the moon was a steady motif as suggested in the titles “Facing the Moon,” “Walking under the Moon,” and “Looking at the Moon.” What makes the moonlit night so attractive? The cultural allure of the moon and its Daoist association aside, the moonlit night represented a moment that belonged exclusively to the couple. To put it differently, it was not necessarily the moon that was the lure; it was the solitude and intimacy enabled by the night that made it alluring. Caiwei described one such night when the two got up late at night to take a walk holding a dim lamp:

No crows fly by making the *xuxu* sound,
 Clouds move slowly.

⁵⁰Sun, Jiuyue shisiri po zhou jingjiang dao zhong xie fu bu yue zuo” 九月十四日泊舟京江道中偕婦步月作, SYXQ, 287.

⁵¹The circumstance of this event was unclear, but the poem's title, “On the fourth of the ninth month, having stopped the boat on the Yangzi River near Zhenjiang, I walked under the moon with my wife,” suggest this was far from Changzhou or Jurong. A long trip away from home like this was rare for a woman of her background, but it makes perfect sense if it was a visit between the two families. The Yangzi River was a common route for travel between the two places.

⁵²Wang Caiwei, “Jiuyue shisiri zhou you Dantu, ye ban yu Weiyang cheng yue deng an xing sanli zuo” 九月十四日舟由丹徒夜半與薇隱乘月登岸行三里作, CLGJ, 369.

Behind the cries of insects comes the sound of a creek,
 Tender bamboo in darkness permeated by dew looks distinct.
 From now on, worldly demands are done with,
 Beginning with this moment, my ill body is cured ...
 Here is someone who shares my heart,
 My accumulated feeling of *qing* cannot be fully expressed.⁵³

This was an occasion of respite, recuperation, intimacy, and spiritual connection. For a moment, the human world retreats and feels so insignificant, and they enjoy a peaceful mind relieved of worries about mundane worldly demands. Wang Caiwei even felt hopeful about her health as she savored this special moment with the man who shared her heart. In commenting on the *guige*, or boudoir, Susan Mann points out that men often fancied it as “a haven in a complex, brutal world” and “a timeless realm shielded from the cares and evils of this world.”⁵⁴ It is in a similar sense that married couples like Sun Xingyan and Wang Caiwei enjoyed the moonlit night; it was an extension of the intimate space of *guige*.

However, it was not just spiritual and emotional connectedness that the couple savored at such intimate moments. Whether outside under the moon or inside their *guige*, physical intimacy was subtly present in these private spaces. Under no one’s gaze, the couple felt comfortable “holding hands” while admiring the moon. Another night, they blew out the candle and opened the curtain to let the moonlight slip in. As Caiwei could not fall asleep, the two got up to take a stroll outside to look at the moon. “Do not forget this secret joy [*you huan* 幽歡],” Sun gently tells his wife.⁵⁵ The phrase “*you huan*” has a connotation of physical intimacy. Here it seems to be referencing the joy associated with physical intimacy as well as spiritual sharing.

As seen in some of these poems, in the background of these intimate moments Caiwei’s poor health loomed large. Getting out on a moonlit night was often a way of relieving insomnia from which Wang Caiwei chronically suffered. She appeared ill regularly in Sun’s poems; it is an image that Sun was fond of presenting. He frequently portrayed their bedroom as being filled with the sound and smell of his “sickly wife”: her moan, her struggle to fall sleep, and the smoke of medicinal herbs. Sun also had a liking for letting his friends know about her poor health. Hong Liangji, for example, frequently mentioned Sun’s sickly wife and his worries. Once Sun sent a poem to another friend, Huang Jingren, on the subject of his “sickly wife,” causing Huang to call him love-crazed (*qingzhong* 情种).⁵⁶

Illness was a common subject in Chinese classic poetry, and as literary scholar Grace Fong demonstrates, late imperial female writers had a particular liking for the subject as both a way of writing about their actual experience and aestheticizing femininity.⁵⁷ Sun Xingyan’s inclination to portray his wife in the light of a sickly beauty and his interest in publicizing her poor health in his social circles suggest that men could subscribe to the

⁵³Wang Caiwei, “Fu yu Jiqiu ye qi shi yue tong zuo” 復與季逵夜起視月同作, *CLGJ*, 360.

⁵⁴Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 49.

⁵⁵Sun, “Fu yu Wang Caiwei kan yue” 復與王采薇看月, *SYXQ*, 295.

⁵⁶Huang Jingren 黃景仁, *Liangdanxuan quanji* 兩當軒全集 (Xuxiu siku quanshi edition), 1474: 411.

⁵⁷Grace S. Fong, “Writing and Illness: A Feminine Condition in Women’s Poetry of the Ming and Qing,” in *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing*, edited by Grace S. Fong and Ellen Widmer (Leiden: Brill Academic Pub, 2010), 19–47.

same cultural idea of aestheticizing female frailty and illness. What is to be noted, however, is that Sun's presentation of the sickly Caiwei was informed primarily by the cultural tradition of conjugal love. An ill wife was at the center of an iconic story of husbandly devotion in Chinese history. Xun Can 荀粲 (209?–238?), a great wife-lover, was said in such deep love with his wife that, when she fell ill with fever, he laid his bare body on ice in bitter winter and then cooled her body with his. He died of sorrow about a year after her death.⁵⁸ By Qing times, the story had acquired a specific symbol: a sickly wife functioned as a foil for the virtue of husbandly love, which molded male fashioning of conjugal devotion. Sun Xingyan in fact explicitly compared himself with the distressed Xun Can as he too was deeply worried about his wife's health, describing in one poem that he felt ill too because of their connectedness even though they were not of one body. Presenting a fragile wife, therefore, was for Sun to present himself as a caring husband with the same capacity for love. In writing about his "sickly wife," Sun put himself on the same altar as some of the great lovers of history.

Mourning

In spring of 1776, Caiwei's health declined. Xingyan took her back to her parents' home as she wished. Over the next few months, he "prepared medicine for her, and was deeply worried."⁵⁹ A poem titled "A Worrying Night" describes a sick Caiwei who was increasingly pallid and emaciated: "to my astonishment her wrist is so thin that her bracelet fell off; the slimmness of her shadow makes her hair look thick ... Roosters hold their wings and won't crow; the long night—what can I do now?"⁶⁰ He wrote Hong Liangji a long letter describing his wife's worsening illness, which caused Hong to share sympathetic tears.⁶¹ But the worries were not enough to keep him by her side all the time. Pressed by his friends, he continued attending fun-seeking events.⁶²

When it became clear that Wang Caiwei's illness was not stabilizing, her mother (her father was away in Beijing) wanted to summon priests to perform rites as a last resort. Caiwei stopped it, saying that a short or a long life was predestined and no deity had the power to change it. It happened that a Daoist relative from Mount Tiger and Dragon was passing by Changzhou. Taking this coincidence as a hopeful omen, the family decided to go ahead with the Daoist rite. It did not work. Caiwei instructed her husband neither to perform a Buddhist ritual for her burial nor to store her coffin in a Buddhist temple (as was the customary practice). Following her wishes, she was quickly buried.⁶³

In Qing times, composing *daowang* poetry had become a standard "ritual" for educated bereaved husbands, but no poems with such titles were found in Sun's

⁵⁸Xu Zhene 徐震罈, *Shishuo xinyu jiao jian* 世說新語校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2001), 489–90.

⁵⁹Zhao Huaiyu, "Sun Jichou qi Wangshi kuangming," *CLGJ*, 385.

⁶⁰Sun Xingyan, "Shou ye" 愁夜, *SYXQ*, 436: 343.

⁶¹Hong Liangji, "De Sunda shu" 得孫大書, *Hong Liangji ji*, 2064, Caiwei's illness was frequently mentioned in Hong Liangji's poems. See, for example, Hong Liangji, "Taizhou shiyuan zashi ji Sunda" 台州使院雜詩寄孫大, "Dong yue ji Sunda" 冬月寄孫大, *Hong Liangji ji*, 2078, 2082.

⁶²For example, several months before Caiwei's death, Sun and Hong Liangji rented a boat and went on an overnight party floating on a creek with three other friends, including Wang Caiwei's brother, to the surprised gaze of the locals. Hong Liangji had such a great time that he called it the last happiest event of his youth. Hong Liangji, "Bayue shiwuri fan zhou Baiyunxi shixu" 八月十五泛舟白雲谿詩序, *Hong Liangji ji*, 296.

⁶³See Sun Xingyan's "shizhuan" and Zhao Huaiyu's "Sun Jichou qi Wangshi kuangming," *CLGJ*, 382, 385.

collected works, probably a result of them not being preserved or him choosing not to use such a formulaic genre. Mourning poems without such titles, however, are scattered throughout his poetry anthology. Sun also wrote a “factual records” (*shizhuang* 事狀) for his deceased wife, which was later lost, and requested a *kuangming* 壙銘 from Zhao Huaiyu, a friend. Early the following year, he traveled to Nanjing to personally ask for a *muzhiming* 墓誌銘 from Yuan Mei. Having a prominent man compose a biography was a high honor to the deceased. Later, Sun commissioned the famous calligrapher Liang Tongshu 梁同書 (1723–1815) to inscribe it on her tombstone.⁶⁴

Sun’s grief was channeled into other actions as well. He summoned a specialist to perform *fujū* (talismanic writing, a kind of divination practice in which an invoked spirit is supposed to write a message on a sand table) to seek her whereabouts in the other world. His action was prompted by a miracle he had witnessed: Wang Caiwei looked as if she were alive when she died. Her body was warm and soft, signs of becoming an immortal. Given Caiwei’s Daoist inclination, it made perfect sense in Sun’s devastated mental state that she had gone to the realm of the immortals. The *fujū* result confirmed his belief: Caiwei now resided in the East Taoli palace in charge of books, and she had written eight poems called “To My Husband.”⁶⁵

In the years that followed, Sun compiled Caiwei’s works into *Changlige ji*. Additionally, he commissioned a portrait of Caiwei and turned their bedroom into a shrine to preserve her memory. He named it “*Changli ge* 長儷閣,” meaning “the Pavilion of Eternal Companions.” The name was different from the one that he gave to her poetry anthology, the “Pavilion of Eternal Departing.” “Eternal companion” and “eternal departing” share the same pronunciation, and clearly, the choice for the new phrase for their bedroom was to emphasize his pledge of fidelity, in life and death. “Holding her hairpin in hand and hanging her portrait in the room,” he was to mourn his only companion for the rest of his life, as noted by Hong Liangji.⁶⁶ He would spend many sleepless nights in that room, often staring at the sky through the window, waiting for rooster’s crow. He describes in one poem:

A long year is like a long night,
I know you are used to enduring sleep alone.
What can this companionless one do?
His eyes gaze at the deep sky ...
A ray of light has not spread to fill the sky;
A bird flies high, its wings making the *susu* sound ...
Long illness cut short of your life,
My bitter tears blend with fine wine (in sacrificial offering).
In darkness are dusty webs that have not been wiped clean,
Looking for a place to rest, a firefly stops on your dress.
Your lonely shoulder endures the wind and dew,
Your breath of illness startles me, as if in the room.
Sorrowful is the light of dawn,
Stars high in the sky, looked like eyes of a widower fish.⁶⁷

⁶⁴Sun Xingyan, “Gao zeng furen wang qi Wangshi shizhuan,” *CLGJ*, 382.

⁶⁵*CLGJ*, 379, 383.

⁶⁶Hong Liangji, “Changlige yixiang zan” 長儷閣遺象贊, *Hong Liangji ji*, 318.

⁶⁷Sun Xingyan, “Que ti” 闕題, *SYXQ*, 436: 343.

In all likelihood, Sun Xingyan had not anticipated that Wang Caiwei's illness would be fatal. Her unexpected death made his recovering from the tragedy all the more difficult. His sorrow was also compounded by a sense of guilt for not making more time for her. About a year after Caiwei's death, he attended a major social gathering, an event of poetry composition. Among those present were famous local poets. Such events usually did not call for works of a personal nature, but for some reason, that particular night elicited an outpouring of grief from Sun. The poem he composed was in a sense a tribute to his deceased wife and also an apology for his past behaviors:

Yellow chrysanthemums, beautiful wine cups, night clock ticks softly,
 Friends of former days gather in dim light.
 Would it be possible for Fengqian [Xun Can], who lives on, to feel happy
 (while his wife is dead)?
 I only take it as if Qin Jia left home and did not return.
 The flickering red candle shines on my face, but my youth is gone,
 Thinking back, the past outings to the blue mountains were so wrong!
 All would become things to cause later regrets,
 In a lightly raining and deeply muddy (day), I dream of a knock on my door.⁶⁸

Allusions to the two icons of husbandly devotion set the tone for his poem. As discussed earlier, Xun Can was a great wife-lover. He was thoroughly stricken by grief after his wife's death—it was said “even though he did not weep, his spirit was broken.” He would die of it about a year later at the age of twenty-nine.⁶⁹ Sun compares himself to the heartbroken Xun Can with the only difference being that he is still alive. The other reference is to Qin Jia and his wife Xu Shu, a second-century couple idolized for their moving departing poems written when Qin had to leave to take a government post far from home.⁷⁰ Here Sun uses the story to suggest that, unlike Qin, he has forever lost the chance to return home to unite with his wife. These lines shed light on the profound impact that her death had on his view of his own life: with Caiwei's death, that chapter of happiness was closed for him and the joyful days were now forever gone. Here, linking the ending of his youth with the death of his wife suggests the powerful role marriage played in a young man's life. With the passing of his companion in marriage, a blissful youth was no longer possible.

The line that comes next, “[t]hinking back, the past outings to the blue mountains were so wrong,” appears to refer to his regrets over his past behavior: his constant outings and other social activities that caused Wang Caiwei misery from loneliness. Here he might be thinking about a poem Caiwei composed after receiving a letter he sent from Nanjing. In it Caiwei describes reading his letter with tears in her eyes, and then she ends it with this image of Sun as a traveler: “Everywhere in the blue mountain the sojourner must be thinking [of me], except when he is drunk.”⁷¹ Nothing could be done to redeem mistakes of the past.

⁶⁸Sun, “Yangzhou ji Fanglitang zhai zhong, tong Wang Jiantan, Jin wanfang zhu jun zuo” 揚州集方立堂齋中同汪劍潭金畹芳諸君作, SYXQ, 295.

⁶⁹Xu Zhene, *Shishuo xinyu*, 489–90.

⁷⁰Xu Ling 徐陵, *Yutai xinyong jianzhu* 玉臺新詠箋註, annotated by Wu Zhaoyi 吳兆宜 et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), 30.

⁷¹Wang Caiwei, “De Weiyong cong Jinling ji yi shu” 得薇隱從金陵寄一書, *CLGJ*, 372.

Another sudden outburst of grief was recorded a year later. At the time, Sun and Hong Liangji were both employed by the Anhui Education Commissioner Liu Quanzhi 劉權之 to work on book compilation projects.⁷² Hong had lost his mother about the same time as Sun lost his wife, and one night during a social gathering, sadness suddenly overcame both men. “Crying for a mother and grieving over a wife” the two made a big scene at the party.⁷³ Hong Liangji had an exceptionally deep emotional bond with his mother (in a state of total confusion and grief upon learning of his mother’s death, he had fallen into a river and almost drowned).

To mourn a mother with that kind of emotional explosion in public would have been acceptable, but to mourn a wife in such a manner would be less so. Ritually speaking, the death of a mother was a much more grave matter. In Qing times, the ritual stipulated that a man mourned the mother’s death for “three-years” (25 months in actuality), and he mourned his wife for one year.⁷⁴ As a man in a state of profound sorrow, however, Sun Xingyan did not care about this. Sun’s display of emotion in such a public venue no doubt revealed his deep sorrow that lingered in the wake of Caiwei’s death, but it is also important to note how the changing culture over wife-mourning might have shaped his behavior. From late Ming onward, wife-mourning among the educated elite evolved from a private matter into a “communal act,” whereby friends, colleagues, and acquaintances readily answered the invitation of the bereaved husband with writings in commemoration of the deceased wife. The manners in which the bereaved husband mourned his wife was viewed as an admirable indicator of the depth of his devotion and love.⁷⁵ Considering this background, one suspect Sun had little reason to moderate his manner of grieving over the loss of his young wife.

Fidelity as a Form of Remembrance

The public outbursts of grief underscore Sun’s struggle to cope with the tragedy of Caiwei’s death, but his decision not to remarry was hard for his friends to fathom. They sang the praises of his “perfect match” marriage and his devotion; nonetheless, they thought this particular act was “excessive.”⁷⁶ Hong Liangji was shocked when Sun declared that he would not remarry for the rest of his life. Hong did not approve of it, as he remarked in the eulogy (*zan* 讚) he composed for a portrait of Wang Caiwei:

(My friend) made a vow that he would close the curtain of their bedroom and will never marry again, and that he would leave the empty room for himself alone to appreciate. My view is that his emotion has crossed the appropriate boundary that defines his role, and his grief is more than what is called for by ritual [qing yu yu fen, ai guo yu li 情逾於份，哀過其禮]. When the portrait [of Wang Caiwei] was drawn, he asked me to write a eulogy. I initially did not agree; then I thought I

⁷²Sun Yuanru *xiansheng nianpu*, 119: 455.

⁷³Hong Liangji, “Du he ji Sunda Xingyan” 渡河寄孫大星衍, *Hong Liangji ji*, 466.

⁷⁴Confucian classics stipulate that a son mourned the death of a mother for one year, but if his father had already died when his mother died, then he would mourn her for “three years.” This rule was abandoned under the Ming founding emperor, who thought it treated mothers unfairly, and for the rest of the Ming and Qing dynasties, mourning a mother for “three years” as one would a father was the standard practice.

⁷⁵See discussions in Martin Huang, *Intimate Memory*, and Lu, *Arranged Companions*, 49–59.

⁷⁶For example, see Wu Xiqi 吳錫麒, *Youzhengweizhai piantiwen* 有正齋駢體文續集 (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 1469: 139.

could ease his sorrow and satisfy his wishes [if I did]. I therefore write it on the head of the painting.⁷⁷

Marital fidelity was among the most gendered social practices in late imperial China. Among the elite, a widow was expected to remain faithful to her deceased spouse, but a widower was expected to take another wife fairly soon, normally after completing one year of mourning. If he did not remarry in a timely manner, it would be a cause for concern because a wife was necessary for maintaining an orderly household as well as performing ancestral rituals. If a widower was sonless, then the urgency of remarriage would be further elevated because it became an issue of family continuation as well.

The rise of the male fidelity phenomenon, thus, represented the most radical aspect of the late imperial movement that made the husband–wife affection a key foundation of marriage.⁷⁸ The term for the “faithful husband,” or *yifu*, literally means “righteous man,” and until the late imperial period, it primarily referred to a man who performed outstanding social deeds. However, over the course of the late imperial period, the term increasingly came to refer to a man who rejected remarriage in his wife’s honor.⁷⁹ In one case, for example, a thirty-year-old *yifu* lost his wife, but before he could give her a proper burial, his house burned down with her coffin inside while he was away. He was said to be so heartbroken that he did not marry the rest of his life.⁸⁰ Another case from the Qianlong reign tells of Chen Yunyuan, who was engaged while he was a child but lost the whereabouts of his fiancé not long after the engagement. Chen refused to marry until he found her in his fifties. His fiancé, likewise, had declined marriage all those years. He was granted the title of *yifu* and her *zhennü* by the emperor.⁸¹ By the nineteenth century, the changing social attitude toward male fidelity appeared to have propelled the Qing government to take the unprecedented step of incorporating *yifu* into the imperial award system (*jingbiao*). For the first time in Chinese history, men became eligible for court awards for the deed of marital devotion.⁸²

In some cases of male fidelity, profound indebtedness or guilt drove the man’s decision, although readers may surmise that love for their fiancé or wives could be the real or main reason for their unconventional actions. There was no such ambiguity in Sun Xinyan’s case, however. His pledge of fidelity was seen by his contemporaries as derived from the deep companionship he forged with Caiwei over their five years of marriage. His friend Shi Yunyu 石蕴玉, for example, noted, “The literary talent of his late wife was exceptional; he did not remarry all his life. This was because [he believed] that an excellent spouse is difficult to get again.”⁸³ Sun’s case was also unique for two

⁷⁷Hong Liangji, “Changlige yixiang zan” 長儷閣遺象贊, *Hong Liangji ji*, 318.

⁷⁸In his study of male fidelity in Chinese history, Bret Hinsch documents the long tradition of marital love and male marital devotion. Hinsch, “The Emotional Underpinnings of Male Fidelity in Imperial China,” *Journal of Family History* 32.4 (2007), 392–412. Actual cases in which a man refused to (re) marry another wife, however, appear to be few.

⁷⁹Yi Jolan 衣若蘭, “Shi bu geng qu—Mingdai nanzi shouzhen chutan” 誓不更娶—明代男子守貞初探, *Zhongguo shixue* (September 2005), 68–69.

⁸⁰Pan Chengzhang 潘程章, *Shongling wenxian* 松陵文獻, 7/76. For an additional case, see *ibid.*, 7/78.

⁸¹See Weijing Lu, *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 164–66.

⁸²Na Xiaoling 那晓凌, “Ming Qing shiqi de ‘yifu’ jingbiao” 明清时期的義夫旌表, *Beijing Daxue yanjiusheng xue zhi* 2 (2007), 51–65. The number of awardees, however, was very small.

⁸³Shi Yunyu, “Fangmao shanren shilu xu” 芳茂山人詩錄序, *SYXQ*, 436: 267; see also Wu Xiqi 吳錫麒, *Youzhengweizhai piantiwen*, 1469: 139.

other reasons: Sun was only twenty-four years old at the time, a very young man, and he did not have a son. To some of his friends, like Hong Liangji, Sun's commitment simply transgressed the proper boundary for remembrance of a spouse. At the heart of the problem was that Sun failed to strike a balance between expressing his conjugal emotion of sorrow and maintaining his familial duties. Ritual functioned to guide the expression of emotion so that it would not affect the fulfillment of these duties, but Sun ignored the ritual, instead letting his emotions take control of his decisions. Conjugal love triumphed over sacred duties owed to his ancestors and family.

However, Sun would take a concubine at age forty. The timing was significant, for age forty was when a man was legally permitted to take concubine if he did not have an heir (although many of his contemporaries ignored this rule). The act was also presented as a compromise, as his grandmother had been urging him to produce an heir to continue his line. By obeying his grandmother's wishes at this particular age, Sun proved his moral character as a Confucian who adhered to principles and a filial grandson who fulfilled a top family obligation for a man. Clearly, Sun himself viewed getting an heir as an important family duty. When his concubine died before giving birth to a son, he took two more in his late fifties, and one of them gave birth to a son when he was already fifty-nine. On the other hand, by taking concubines rather than a wife, Sun was able to maintain his pledge of fidelity. Thanks to the difference in ritual and legal status, a concubine was no in shape or form considered a wife.

That Sun waited for well over a decade to take this step did suggest the effort on his part to uphold the image of a loyal husband, but he struggled at times emotionally and sexually during those lonely years. In one instance he took an interest in an actor while he was employed by Shanxi governor Bi Yuan. He persuaded the actor, surnamed Guo, to stay for the night. Guo suddenly pleaded to leave at midnight when gates of the city had already been closed. Sun had no choice but to make a tall ladder by connecting short ones to help him cross the city wall, but Guo was caught by the patrolmen and reported to the governor. Bi Yuan released him immediately because he didn't want Sun to know about it, which would cause him embarrassment. At the time, Sun seemed to be in a chaotic psychological state. His "unrestricted" behaviors, which included insulting his colleagues after heavy drinks, caused him to be loathed by many of these colleagues. In the end, Bi Yuan had to place him in a separate quarter with even better treatment.⁸⁴

Sexual trysts of literati with male actors, especially female impersonators, were not always looked upon with disapproval.⁸⁵ The case is interesting in its suggestion about the perception regarding male-male sexual relations and male marital fidelity. Sun Xingyan faithfully observed his promise not to remarry, but he apparently did not see having a relationship with another man as a violation of his vow. The pledge of a faithful widower may not necessarily imply strict celibacy. It was defined primarily in social and ritual terms: the ritual and social position of wife was to remain vacant. This definition, however, by no means diminished the significance of the pledge in literati culture during this period.

Conclusions

In his late years, Sun commissioned a painting from the famous painter Luo Pin 羅聘 (1733–1799). It was one of ten paintings he commissioned to commemorate "past dreams," or special moments, in his life. Titled "Writing Poems together at the

⁸⁴Hong Liangji, *Beijiang shihua* (Xuxiu siku edition), 1705: 31.

⁸⁵See Cuncun Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

Sunset Mountain,” the painting is set on an autumn evening in Jurong and depicts him and Caiwei “discussing history under the cold light of the lamp and the moon.” He noted sentimentally that that was when Caiwei wrote the verse “the fading moon of dusk steals the shade of the lamp; amid wind, cries of geese are followed by cries of a tree full of crows.”⁸⁶ The poetic images were beautiful, he noted, but he sensed they were inauspicious omens. Caiwei would die in just a year. This was a particularly symbolic scene for him personally, but Sun’s choice of the setting and subject for the painting is worth noting too. They carried rich symbolism about what he believed to be the greatest sources of happiness in his marriage: the intellectual companionship at a moment of solitude.

Wang Caiwei and Sun Xingyan were one of the many couples in High Qing that embraced the “perfect match” ideal and endeavored to turn it into their own reality. Their story enables us to gain some understanding of what this ideal meant for aspiring youths and how they managed to nurture and grow their relationships, even as ritual principles defined marriage and marital relationships squarely in patriarchal terms. Limitations in scope notwithstanding, the story reveals unequivocally that young couples in the High Qing were passionate about love and had the means of creating intimate spaces. Although this case was about youthful passion of the well-educated, as other studies have shown, marital companionship was widely recognized as a key foundation of a happy marriage and was celebrated in all stages of the lifecycle.

In a “perfect match” marriage, a wife’s ability to write and engage in stimulating intellectual conversations was a necessary condition. Sun would have considered himself fortunate to have married Caiwei. Under the arranged marriage system, he had little control over whom he would marry (although there were exceptions).⁸⁷ But it was not a complete stroke of luck that the marriage turned out to be blissful. It was, after all, the age of talented women. The conscious upbringing of their daughter by Wang Caiwei’s family was no doubt a huge factor. Her father, who searched diligently to find a successful examination candidate for a son-in-law, knew well that his daughter should be taught in the arts and literature to make a “perfect match,” and he was indeed satisfied that he found “a man of talent” (*caizi* 才子) for his bright daughter.

It may be argued that in the “perfect match” marriage, a wife’s ability to write poetry and discuss books was not the end goal of an ideal marriage in itself, but this ability was critically important because it performed the most important function for building marital bonds: it enabled an educated couple to forge connections beyond the conventional gendered realm of interaction. “Literacy enhances marital relationships,” noted the famous writer Qu Dajun.⁸⁸ Education and literary knowledge opened an exciting channel for marital communication and sharing, which served to tear down somewhat gender barricades and conjugal hierarchy, thus bringing them closer emotionally and spiritually as well as intellectually.

⁸⁶SYXQ, 436: 330.

⁸⁷For discussion on the relationship between arranged marriage and marital relationships, see Weijing Lu, *Arranged Companions*, 80–82.

⁸⁸Du Dajun, “Qixi yong xianjitu,” in *Wengshan shiwai* (Xuxiu siku quanshu edition), 589.