

Telling the Story of Tanyangzi

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Abstract

This article examines issues of concealing and revealing by looking at writing about Tanyangzi (1557-1580), a young women religious teacher who was the daughter of Wang Xijue. The article examines the production of the chief source about her life, the Tanyang dashi zhuan, which appears in Wang Shizhen's Yanzhou shanren xugao, and concludes that the biography was the result of a collaboration between Wang Shizhen and Wang Xijue. The biography recounts Tanyangzi's religious development, including her visions of visits to the Queen Mother of the West, and culminating in her ascending heavenward and attaining immortality on the ninth day of the ninth month in 1580. The article looks at works written to promote the teachings of Tanyangzi as well as works written to discredit her. It concludes that her disciples (including her father) who wrote about her wrote to claim control of the story from her detractors. Silence would, in this case, not have served the interests of her privacy. The article further argues that the religious work of Tanyangzi meant that ordinary rules of privacy did not apply her work as a religious teacher demanded that she make herself visible and available to a community of believers.

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When I first began this project on Tanyangzi 曇陽子 (1557-1580), the young woman religious teacher who was the daughter of Wang Xijue 王錫爵 (1534-1611), many things about the story intrigued me. First of all, the story itself is a fascinating one, and I'll tell it briefly in a moment. But almost as interesting as the story itself is the story of people telling the story, and as my book evolved, one of the things that it came to be about was people telling stories about her, the choices they made about concealing and revealing, the venues they spoke (or wrote) in, the media and genres they used. I was surprised, and in some cases even shocked, by the private matters the followers of Tanyangzi wrote about. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to look at this story once again through the lens of concealing and revealing. I'd like to suggest that authority, audience and medium (or genre) are key points to consider in looking at the questions of concealing and revealing in the story of Tanyangzi. Although her case is distinctive enough that we can't take it as "typical" (whatever that might be), I think it does illuminate productively the intersections among religion and gender, privacy and concealment.

In this paper I will talk about privacy in several registers. I will first tell the story and as I do so, I will highlight issues of privacy, concealing and revealing. The remainder of the paper will be concerned with the telling of the story: first in the hands of family and followers, and second, in the hands of doubters and detractors. I will make several points as the paper unfolds. First, because this is a story about a religious teacher, it may well be that it revolves around a slightly different axis of concealing and revealing than a more secular story would. One of the primary acts Tanyangzi engages in is the transmission of texts from the world of the immortals to the human world. This is a story about religious revelation as much as it is a story about a young woman, and as such revelation is essential to the story. But neither Tanyangzi nor her followers

are at liberty to reveal everything at several points in the Tanyang dashi zhuan, the main text I will be discussing today, it is made clear that there are secrets which cannot be divulged. The second point I want to make suggests that the desire of the followers of Tanyangzi to circulate her story comes in large part from their desire to claim control of the story. As Sissela Bok argues in *Secrets*, a key determinant of privacy is maintaining some semblance of control of what is concealed and what is revealed.¹ Privacy and silence are not the same thing.

Let's get on with the story.

The Story

Tanyangzi was the daughter of Wang Xijue, who was to become senior grand secretary in 1585. Her birth was marked by auspicious signs, and as a very young child she showed precocious signs of religious devotion to Guanyin 觀音. As an adolescent, she stopped eating when her parents began preparations for her marriage to Xu Jingshao, a fellow townsman from Taicang 太倉. When her parents voiced their concern at her not eating, she told them not to worry, that deities were bringing her food. She was betrothed to Xu Jingshao, but when preparations for the marriage began, she announced to her parents that she did not want to marry. When Xu died before the wedding took place, she asked for, and was granted, permission to live as his widow. In order to carry out her religious exercise, Tanyangzi needed to gain a degree of privacy unusual for a woman of her class in late Ming China. Privacy here has several registers one of the components of privacy is time to one's self, but another component to privacy is the ability to restrict or refuse access to the body. Both were achieved by her adamant de-

1 Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

mands that she be treated as a widow after the death of her fiancé. Wang Shizhen's biography describes the scene:

My teacher wept, disheveled her hair and went barefoot. Three days later, she took out of her bag a plain white silk garment and straw shoes which she herself had made. She put on the garment and shoes and went to see her parents, saying:

“Although I was to have been Xu's wife, out of concern for my parents I do not seek death. Nonetheless I want to serve as Xu's widow.” Her father, objecting, said: “But you were not Xu's wife, so how can you be his widow?” My teacher said: “Are you, father, saying that just because you don't draw a salary, that it means that you are any less a subject of the ruler? Then on the day when the death of the emperor is proclaimed, why do even the clerks and common people weep and imitate the ritual of mourning?” Her father was not able to reply, and my teacher mourned even more.²

This is one register where we see issues of privacy coming to the fore; Tanyangzi is manipulating prescriptions against widow remarriage (which are, quite correctly, normally regarded as oppressive to women) as a means to gain the physical privacy she needed to carry out her religious work. The privacy is both a privacy of her body (chastity) and a room of her own.

As time went on, her practice became more and more refined. Her spirit went wandering, and she became cognizant of the gods that resided in her own body. She visited both Guanyin and the Queen Mother of the West in her visionary experiences. Although the tone of the biography is hagiographic, it does communicate a strong sense that to

2 Yanzhou shanren xugao 兪州山人續稿 (Taipei: Wenhai chuban she, 1970), hereafter abbreviated as YXG, 78/4a, p. 3795.

outsiders, Tanyangzi's behavior seemed eccentric, and that the opinion of outsiders mattered to the Wang family. At one point when the family is living with Wang Xijue in the capital, his parents decide that they will take her back to Suzhou because she is beginning to be the subject of gossip.³ At another point, her father comments on the attention she attracts and asks her if she can somehow moderate her practice so as to be more discreet.

One day at noon, someone clad in yellow with a swaggering gait danced on the roof of the building. Suddenly, with one small leap, she went upward, twenty feet above the roof, and then came down. All of the servants stared at her, and all the neighbors' servants stared at her. They recognized her as my teacher, and were a little more convinced. But her father advised her, saying: "Can't you restrain yourself a bit more?" My teacher said: "I see your point. Indeed, why do I refuse to conceal my radiance and phosphor and quietly enter the great Dao? It is because my family is well to do and prominent, and furthermore I have a woman's body. How else could I teach those of meager knowledge, except by miracles? Furthermore, all my painful efforts have been for the enlightenment of you two gentlemen [i.e. Wang Shizhen and Wang Xijue]. If it were not for you, I could have left my physical body in the space of a single day."⁴

This passage is an important one in helping us to think about revealing and concealing in this story: the restrictions which society places on upper-class female behavior give her no alternative but to engage in spectacular feats like soaring above rooftops. As an upper-class woman, she is concealed, but as a religious teacher she must reveal herself in order to carry out her work. She reminds her father and her biographer

3 YXG, 78/7a, p. 3801.

4 YXG, 78/11b, p. 3808.

that she is not only a teacher, she is their teacher, and furthermore, that being their teacher has not been particularly easy. The community formed by her father and biographer (among others) is essential to her religious work, and the needs of the community for information, for revelation, exist in tension with her need for privacy and their need to keep her concealed

Tanyangzi receives texts from the world of the immortals, which she annotates with rare brilliance. (The Tanyang dashi zhuan tells us that she had been only marginally literate before her visions began; with the texts came the ability to read them.) She visits the court of the Queen Mother of the West 西王母, and she visualizes Guanyin. Although the text is richly descriptive, sometimes even lushly so, there are places where the text draws a veil of silence, telling the reader that there are secrets (mi 密) which cannot be transmitted.⁵

She acquires a snake, which she names Guardian Dragon (Hu long 護龍), who is her companion throughout her religious exercises, and who attains immortality with her. She attracts disciples, both male and female (although we know much more about the male disciples than the female ones.) A number of her disciples were well-known literati, including Wang Shizhen 王世貞(1526-90) and Tu Long 屠隆(1542-1605) and her own father, and they wrote extensively about her, in essays, poetry and letters. As was true of many late Ming religious figures, she was devoted to texts both of Buddhism and Daoism, but the central act she performed was the attaining of Daoist immortality. On the ninth day of the ninth month in 1580, with an audience of a hundred thousand people present, she ascended heavenward in broad daylight and attained immortality. Her father and Wang Shizhen retreated to a temple, which they named the Tiandan guan in honor of two of the key tenets of her

5 YXG, 78/17b.

teaching, tian 恬 and dan 淡 .

Later that year, Wang Shizhen and Wang Xijue wrote the Tanyang dashi zhuan (曇陽大師傳 The biography of Tanyang the great teacher), which is an extraordinary document in many ways. It is very long at sixty pages it defies the generic conventions of biography by its sheer length. It maintains a kind of doubled vision: Tanyangzi is simultaneously presented as an important religious teacher and a slightly difficult daughter. Indeed, it was based on a draft written by Wang Xijue, Tanyangzi's father, and was polished (rather hastily) by Wang Shizhen. After her death, her father and her biographer purchased a small parcel of land on which they built a shrine which they called the Tanyang guan 曇陽觀 in her honor. For a very brief time, Wang Shizhen retired from the ways of the world there, though from his list of visitors (and from his complaints about them) it seems to have been a fairly sociable retirement. Sometime in 1581, Wang Shizhen, his brother Wang Shimou 王世懋(1536-1588), Wang Xijue and his brother Wang Dingjue 王鼎爵(1536-1585) were impeached for heterodoxy for their role in the cult. The text that Wang Xijue and Wang Shizhen composed was singled out in the documents of impeachment: it was called a text which "seduces people's minds." As with many impeachments in the sixteenth century, nothing came of this one. And indeed, Wang Xijue's career was not seriously damaged it was five years after this episode that he became senior grand secretary.

The biography is replete with personal (one might even say, private) details of Tanyangzi's life. One of the more interesting of these episodes is a series of temptations which the deities who serve as Tanyangzi's intermediaries to the divine world put to her. They clarify that her refusal to marry has not resolved the issue of her sexuality, and the ways in which sexuality might bind her to the mortal world. I will quote the text of the temptation sequence from the Biography in full:

Thereupon, the Perfected Ones came in increasing numbers, and gradually with demon-methods tested my teacher. Once she dreamed she was in a broad wilderness. A well-dressed woman sat down facing her, holding a register book. At its top were the words: Mutual longings (Xiang si 相思). My teacher thought: "Isn't this rather wicked?" She drove her off.

Suddenly a crafty lad with a scar on his cheek appeared. My teacher with all her strength pushed him. Suddenly, a man clad in armor appeared, brandishing a knife and shouting: "How dare you hurt my child? If you take my advice and marry him, you'll live. If you don't I'll cut your throat." The teacher extended her neck to endure the knife. The knife was on the point of coming down when Zhenjun 真君 arrived with a smile. Then [my teacher] regained consciousness.

One night a young man, gowned and capped, came before her and presented his calling card, saying: "I am Xu. I know that you have endured bitterness on my account; I have come especially to comfort you." My teacher, without any change of expression said: "I have been constant in my intentions; how could I have preserved my chastity out of passion (qing 情)? Are you someone else's ghost? If you are, then disperse. If you are Xu, return and wait for my po (soul 魄) some other day at your grave." The youth, abashed, begged his leave and went. Finally there came a feather-garbed starry-capped one who sighed and said to the Teacher: "Silly girl. How can there be immortals in this world? All you have seen up until now have been only fox-demons. Long association with them causes death." My teacher was silent and did not respond. The starry-capped one went on to say "I lament that your life is as brief as mushrooms and dew, and want to save you. If you start eating again, your elegant skin and lovely hair will exceed all earthly models of beauty. How about it?" My master once again did not answer. The Daoist suddenly vanished and Zhenjun and Teacher

Ou were by her side. They clapped their hands and said: “We have repeatedly tested you: you have repeatedly passed.”⁶

These temptations clearly demonstrate that physical, sensual nature must be transcended in order to gain transcendence. It is at moments like this that we become critically aware that we are not listening to the unmediated voice of Tanyangzi, but to a representation of that voice through the words of a middle-aged male literatus. Her sexuality may have had very different meanings to members of her cult than it did to her. The centrality of chastity and virginity in the construction of her life and her religious discipline are consonant with what we know of the ways of men of the late Ming imagined women and female virtue: one would like very much to have record of these temptations in Tanyangzi’s own hand. It is of course entirely possible that the cultural meanings of chastity and virtue were held in common by men and women in the late Ming. But until we recover more of what women thought, we need to be attentive to the fact that the discourse on virtue that we presently know about is predominantly a male discourse. And of course our reading of this passage is made more complex yet when we remember that her father wrote the first draft of it. He is not only talking in public, in print, about his daughter; he is talking in public about his daughter’s sexuality. To be sure, the point is that she triumphs over temptation and remains chaste. But discourses about chastity cannot help but be discourses about sexuality. I’d like to suggest that what is operating in this particular passage is that the need to tell the story of the religious teacher Tanyangzi overrides the need for family privacy.

6 YXG, 78/6a-b, pp. 3799-3800.

Getting the Story Right: Textual Transmission and Privacy

The Tanyang dashi zhuan, written just months after Tanyangzi's ascent into immortality, seems to have found rather rapid circulation, and the very rapidity of the circulation is one of the things which led to the impeachment of the four Wangs. The censor Sun Chengnan 孫承南 wrote in his document of impeachment:

Since I have taken up office as a censor,⁷ the transmission of the story has increased greatly. Those who have just read the Tanyang dashi zhuan print and distribute it in the morning market. I cannot contain my fear and alarm.⁸

Thus, central to the impeachment was the wide circulation of this particular text, and fear of its impact. It seems from Sun's statement that ordinary readers are printing and distributing the text.

That the story had wide circulation may also be inferred from contemporaries who mention the cult, often just in passing: Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551-1602),⁹ Geng Dingxiang 耿定向 (1524-96 js 1556),¹⁰ Guan Zhidao 管志道 (1536-1606, js 1571),¹¹ Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578-1642), Shen

7 The date at which Sun takes up his position as a censor in Yunnan and Shandong is the ding mao day of the eighth year of the Wanli reign period (Guo que, edit by Tan Qian [Beijing: Guji chuban she, 1948] p. 4371), which corresponds to October 8, 1580. Tanyangzi's ascent to immortality occurred on the ninth day of the ninth month of the eighth year of the Wanli reign period, which corresponds to October 17, 1580.

8 Wanli dichao 萬曆邸鈔 (Taipei: Guoli zhongyang tushu guan, 1969), p.119.

9 Hu Yinglin refers to Tanyangzi in a list of immortals named Wang, in Shaoshi shanfang bicong 少室山方筆叢 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), p.589. He also apparently composed a text named "Tanyang dengzhen bian" (曇陽登真編 Tanyang ascends to the Perfected) which seems no longer to be extant. Wang Shizhen refers to the text in a letter to Hu Yinglin. See YXG 206/3b, p.9218.

10 Geng Tiantai xiansheng wenji 耿天台先生文集 (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1970), 19/33b (vol. 4, p. 1890).

11 Tiruozhai xuji 惕若齋續集 (Microfilm of Ming edition held at Naikaku Bunko), 2/55a-60b.

Zan 沈瓚 (1588-1612), Lou Jian 婁堅 (1569-1631), Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558-1639), Xu Wei 徐謂 (1521-93),¹² and Mo Shilong 莫是龍 (fl.1552-87).¹³ Catalogs of the libraries of Ming and Qing bibliophiles note texts with the variant titles Tanyangzi shi lue 曇陽子事略, Tanyang zhuan 曇陽傳, Tanyangzi zhuan 曇陽子傳, Tanyang zhuan lue 曇陽傳略.¹⁴ It is hard to

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- 12 Xu Wei wrote a series of ten poems, which are contained in Xu Wenzhang san ji 徐文長三集 (Taipei: Guoli zhongyang tushu guan, 1968) vol. 1, pp. 339-342. He also wrote an essay entitled “Tan dashi zhuan lue” (曇大師傳略 An outline of the biography of the great teacher Tan) which clearly draws on the biography written by Wang Shizhen. Xu Wenzhang yigao 徐文長逸稿 included in Zhongguo wenxue zhenben congshu vol. 46 (Shanghai: Shanghai zazhi gongsi, 1935-36), p. 336.
- 13 Mo Shilong, Bizhu, Congshu jicheng ed., vol. 554, p. 23.
- 14 The library catalog of Zhao Qimei 趙氣美, the son of Zhao Yongxian 趙用賢 (1535-1596), who was a disciple of Tanyangzi, contains an entry for a text entitled Tanyangzi shi lue (A Draft Essay on the Matter of Tanyangzi) with no author indicated. (Mowangguan shumu 脈望館書目, zi section, 3b.) The Mowangguan shumu also contains a notice for a text entitled Tanyang dashi zhuan (zi, 3b). Evidence that a text other than the Tanyang dashi zhuan was circulated is provided by Wu Yuancui 伍袁萃, who referred to the fact that in 1580, a friend of his in the capital gave him a text entitled Tanyang zhuan (Biography of Tanyang). (Wu Yuancui, Linju manlu 林居漫錄 bieji 2/5b.) The section on Daoism in the library catalog of Xu Qianxue 徐乾學 lists two copies of a text entitled Tanyangzi zhuan (Biography of Tanyangzi) in two zhuan, again with no attribution of authorship. (Quanshilou shumu 傳是樓書目, zi section, p.17b) A text with the same title (but in only one juan) is listed in the Qianqingtang shumu 千頃堂書目 (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1967), a catalog of the library of Huang Yuji 黃虞稷 (1629-1691). The Qianqingtang entry lists Wang Shizhen as author. There is concrete evidence for another edition of the text as early as 1581. A modern catalog lists a Tanyang dashi zhuan (with no divisions into juan), attributed to Wang Shizhen, published by one Zhang Qi 張齊 in 1581. (Du Xinfu 杜信孚, Mingdai banke zonglu 明代版刻綜錄 [Yangzhou: Jiangnan guanglu guju keyinshe, 1983], 4/53b). In addition to the entries with variant titles discussed above, we find the Tanyang dashi zhuan in other library catalogs. The catalog of Xu Po 徐勃 (1570-1642) also lists it, as do several seventeenth-century catalogs. Several early twentieth-century catalogs list a text called Tanyang zhuan lue, with Wang Shizhen as the author. See the entry in the Jiangsu shengli guoxue tushu congmu (Nanjing, 1933-35) 20/2a which cites a manuscript of that title, with no divisions into juan. A text entitled Tanyangzi ji (Collection on Tanyangzi) is listed in the Qing dynasty catalog of Jin Tan. A play entitled “Tanyang ji,” which Jiang Yifu describes as no longer extant, is listed in one of the catalogs to Xu Po’s library. The play must have been written prior to Xu’s death in 1642. (Jiang

know how many different texts are represented by these various titles, but it is clear from the evidence in library catalogs that texts dealing with Tanyangzi found wide circulation, and that some of them are no longer extant. Wang Shizhen himself says in the Tanyang dashi zhuan that many people had taken up the brush to honor and commemorate Tanyangzi.¹⁵

The plethora of talk and writing about Tanyangzi, not all of it favorable, casts her followers (and admirers—the circle of the second was significantly larger than the first) in a difficult position, and gives us pause when we think about privacy. Privacy is not identical to silence, and indeed, in this case, as we shall see, her followers believed that silence would have been tantamount to relinquishing the story. Protecting the story required telling it, lest others tell it and get it wrong.

Let's look for a moment at the history of the generation of the biography. The Tanyangzi dashi zhuan provides us with information about its own generation in a way which suggests that concerns about making the story public were, after all, very real. The text tells us that Wang Xijue had kept a diary chronicling the religious development of Tanyangzi. When Xijue gave the diary to her, she burned it. Sixteen days after her ascension, Tanyangzi appeared to her father and Wang Shizhen in identical dreams. Her father says to her:

“Although you do not seek fame, how can you let your story vanish, without leaving behind anything for people to learn? Moreover, the appetite of people for enticing the hidden (gou yin 鉤隱) and drawing out the strange is inexhaustible. They rely on their own assumptions, and what they can see is as narrow as the view from a seven-inch tube.”

The teacher [Tanyangzi] nodded and said, “That is true. What shall we

Yifu, *Gudian xiju cangshu mulu* [Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1982], p. 132.)

15 YXG, 78/31b, p. 3849.

do about it?" [Her father] said: "I myself would like to write your biography, but an intimate (qin 親) biographer will not do. I would like Wang Shizhen to write your biography, but an outsider (shu 疏) as a biographer will not do either. An intimate is too close to his subject, while an outsider lacks intimate details. Why not then have Wang [Shizhen] write the biography using a rough draft that I will write?" The teacher nodded again and said "Fine."¹⁶

Tanyangzi, alive, burned her story, but that was not the end of it. Nonetheless, authority over her story extended beyond her mortal life and she authorizes the reconstruction of the destroyed text. She and her biographers circumvent normal concerns with privacy because they have a particular mission. The biography promises to teach people of later generations the true dao, and it expresses the hope that, as the authoritative biography, it will quash rumors which would damage the reputation of Tanyangzi.

We may infer from the dream anxiety about the propriety of writing a biography of a young woman, of a daughter. More explicit evidence of concern about the propriety of writing comes from letters exchanged among disciples. Wang Shizhen urged Tu Long not to write about Tanyangzi at a time when he must have been writing his own biography of her. He reminded Tu Long that Tanyangzi had said "Those who know the great Dao do not speak of it, and even those who speak of it do not write of it."¹⁷ Tu Long presented his view of his differences with Wang Shizhen in a letter written sometime late in 1580 to Shen Maoxue 沈懋學 (1539-1582). Tu sent Shen, also a disciple, a copy of the biography he had written. The text had not yet been circulated: Tu tells Shen that only Wang Shizhen had seen the text. He reports that Wang Shizhen

16 YXG, 78/25b, p. 3838.

17 YXG, 200/4b-5a, pp. 8992-93.

told him to keep the text secret, and wait for some sign that Tanyangzi approved of its composition. If she made no objections, then Tu could later make the text public, in order to enlighten later generations. But, Tu counters, “If I do not publish it, then gossips who hear the story from afar will distort the story and destroy the truth. This would not benefit the Dao. The best thing to do would be to publish it.”¹⁸

Wang Shizhen’s counsel of secrecy seems a bit disingenuous. He must himself at this time have been working on his own biography of Tanyangzi. In a letter dated early spring 1581 to Xu Xuemo, then the Minister of Rites, Wang Shizhen wrote, “I have recently completed a draft of the Tanyang xianshi zhuan 曇陽仙師傅. My text is verbose and weak: I have not grasped her essence. I have only written the gist of the matter. Please be discreet and don’t let anyone hear of it.”¹⁹ Wang Shizhen wrote in a letter to another colleague, “I’ve recently completed a draft of the Xianshi zhuan. Read it and see what you think. I say that extraordinary people perform extraordinary events, and that this text does not depart from ordinary reality.”²⁰ Wang sent copies of the biography to several other people as well.²¹

Tu Long also wrote to Wang Xijue about his biography of Tanyangzi and asked Xijue to circulate the text. Tu Lung sent four copies of his biography of Tanyangzi to his kinsman Tu Benjun 屠本駿 and suggested that Benjun republish it, perhaps adding a preface of his own.²² Wang Xijue wrote to Fan Shouji 范守己 that he’d like to compile a list of the rumors and submit it to Fan and others for editing. But, he writes, his pen is weak and his mind is confused and he has not been able to bring

18 Bo yu ji 百榆集(Taipei: Weiwen tushu chuban she, 1977), 6/14b-15a, p. 334-35.

19 YXG, 201/7b, p. 9046.

20 Letter to Lu Zicheng in YXG, 205/9b, p. 9192.

21 See for example, YXG, 201/2a, p. 9024.

22 Bo yu ji, p.342.

himself to complete the task. He has instead entrusted the compilation to Wang Shizhen. Xijue continues that there are several issues that he is particularly interested in clarifying: the origins of the affair, the things Tanyangzi left behind, and the comings and goings of the numinous snake.²³

In a letter to Liu Ting-i written after the disciples had been impeached, Wang Shizhen says that he and Wang Xijue wrote the biography to combat accusations of sorcery (yao 妖). He continues, “We did not think that it would itself, on the contrary, be regarded as yao 妖. Although there may be some extravagance in the language, everything in it I saw and heard myself. I did not embellish.”²⁴ Wang Shizhen regarded the composition of the biography as a way of combatting rumors and verifying the authenticity of his teacher. Instead, however, the biography itself had become the focus of controversy. This correspondence about texts, some still extant and some probably not, shows ways in which literati networks circulated and republished texts, and shows the urgency with which her family and followers regarded the need to get the story right.

The story of Tanyangzi is not a story which was told by outsiders; her father and her disciples participated not only in the writing of texts about her but also in their production and distribution. They further commissioned images of her, which were probably used as devotional objects. (Indeed, the texts themselves may have been devotional objects and their reproduction an act accumulating merit. Wang Xijue indicates as much when he writes in a letter to Fan Shouji, the author of a biography of Tanyangzi that there is not space to consider here, that Fan’s writing the biography was an act of merit.) At least two of the images, paintings by You Qiu 尤求 (1572-83), survive.²⁵ One is a hanging scroll, the other is in

23 Yulongzi ji 御龍子集, 1590 edition, microfilm held at University of Chicago library, 46/7a.

24 YXG, 205/7a, p. 9187.

25 One of the images is in the Shanghai museum, and has been reproduced in Steven Little, *Taoism and the Arts of China* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago and Berkeley: University

an album. Both have substantial inscriptions, with her teachings. Images seem to have been produced in fairly substantial numbers. Wang Shizhen refers (in a letter) to an engraving of her which had been used to make rubbings. The engraving had been worn to the point that only a dim outline remained.²⁶ Both Tu Long and Wang Shizhen themselves made images of her.²⁷ Thus in word and image, this was a story that had to be told.

Impeachment, Rumors and Blasphemy

But it was a story that could be told in more than one way. Let us turn now to the substance of the rumors Wang Shizhen, Wang Xijue, Tu Long, Fan Shouji and others were so concerned to quash. The memorials of impeachment by the censors Niu Weibing 牛惟炳 and Sun Chengnan, written months after Tanyangzi's ascent, are a good place to start. The memorials of impeachment do not attack Tanyangzi herself so much as they attack the literati members of her cult. In his memorial, Niu Weibing asks that three measures be taken to combat the cult: that the Tiandan temple, the Peace and Tranquility Temple built by Wang Xijue and Wang Shizhen, be dismantled; that the printing blocks for Wang Shizhen's biography of Tanyangzi be destroyed, and that the body of the girl (which Niu asserts is still in the shrine) be buried. The censor Sun Chengnan, as we saw above, is particularly concerned with the rapidity of the transmission of Wang Shizhen's biography of Tanyangzi.

Both Niu and Sun begin their denunciations with general state-

of California Press, 2000.) The other image is in the Gugong in Beijing and has not been published. See my "Picturing Tanyangzi," paper presented at the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting, Chicago, March 2001.

26 YXG, p. 8242. Wang Shizhen refers to images of Tanyangzi in other letters. See YXG, 189/14a. p. 8589, for example.

27 Bo yu ji, 6/18b, p. 342 and *ibid*.

ments about the pervasiveness of heterodoxy. Niu charges that “believers in sorcery are daily increasing”²⁸ and Sun says “Important officials have fomented rebellion and seduced people’s minds, greatly harming local customs and the like.”²⁹ The cult of Tanyangzi represented to these two men a part of a general crisis – growing elite support of heterodox religion.³⁰ Niu’s concern that Wang Xijue has abdicated his position of moral authority among the Suzhou population is clear. Even worse than this abdication was his use of his position of moral authority for heterodox ends. Niu’s first reaction upon hearing that the daughter of a good Confucian family was engaging in occult activities seems to have been sympathy. But when he obtained a copy of the text and read it, his sympathy for Wang Xijue vanished. Instead of a father embarrassed by his daughter’s activities, Wang Xijue is a promoter of those activities. After giving a rather extravagant description of Wang Xijue’s credentials as a Confucian man of letters, Niu writes, “in the space of a single day, he has become mired in gods and demons – all he has studied he has cast aside.”³¹ The lure of the divine and the demonic is so potent that even the best of Confucian educations is not sufficient to combat it. It is important that Wang Xijue eschew heterodoxy and return to the correct way because the common people would imitate him in his reform as they had imitated him in his heresy. The same power that made the local elite moral exemplars also made them capable of deluding and hence

28 Wanli dichao, p. 117.

29 Wanli dichao, p. 119.

30 On the general increase in alarm about religion beginning in the Wanli era, see B. J. ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teaching in Chinese Religious History* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), p. 109. See also the discussion of the growing interest of the late Ming elite in Buddhism, and occasional Confucian criticisms of it in Timothy Brook, *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 92.

31 Wanli dichao, p. 119.

corrupting the masses. This power of Wang Xijue, and what Niu sees as its corruption, is the chief concern of the memorial.

The essential concerns of Niu Weibing are mirrored in the memorial of Sun Chengnan. But Sun has a different view of the moral perspicacity of the ordinary person.

Local people all know that she was possessed by a snake-demon; only her father Xijue asserted that she was an immortal. There are those who scorn and laugh about it; there are those who are terrified and alarmed about it.

When Sun wishes to discredit Tanyangzi he does not accuse her and her erudite pupils of fraud. Rather, he asserts that she has been possessed by a snake-demon (yao she 妖蛇). The snake has been transformed into the agent of evil in Sun Chengnan's telling of the tale. Tanyangzi and perhaps even her father and her biographer were duped by it. Ordinary people recognize the snake for what it is: only Xijue casts his daughter as an immortal. The same ordinary people whom Niu finds subject to delusion are in Sun's memorial capable of seeing events (and demons) clearly. The ornamental education which fails to prevent delusion in Niu's version explicitly leads to it in Sun's. Sun clearly implies that the casting of Tanyangzi as an immortal was instrumental: the stories of immortality, replete with "all manner of strange and odd things which do not make sense" are to conceal the sordid story of serpent possession. Sun is also incensed by the social inversion represented by the gender and generational inversion; he has "never before heard of a daughter being master and a father being disciple."

But heterodoxy and social inversion are not the only points of this story which arouse Sun's ire. He suggests that there would have been several appropriate responses for "the crowd who witnessed the episode"

to take. They could have admonished Xijue, or they could have remained silent. But producing an ornate text and distributing it were inappropriate responses. Writing and publishing the story are central to the heterodoxy. Odd behavior which finds no public acclaim is merely odd behavior: it poses no significant social threat.

Perhaps as significant as the impeachment is the fact that nothing came of it. Impeachment was more or less a normal tool of sixteenth-century Chinese politics, a setback in the career of the man impeached, but in and of itself almost never the end of his career.

The denunciations of Sun Chengnan and Niu Weibing are mild compared to those of Tan Qian 談遷 (1594-1658), well known as the compiler of the authoritative annalistic history of the Ming dynasty, the *Guo que* 國權. Tan Qian is not a contemporary of the events he is chronicling; indeed, they took place fourteen years before his birth. But his account is privileged in later texts.³² Tan Qian's version of events (contained in his miscellany the *Zaolin zazu* 棗林雜俎) is as follows:

Xijue's daughter was betrothed to the son of the assistant administrative commissioner Xu Tingguan. But before the marriage took place, the son died. At that time in the Wang household there was a white fox that came and went. [The fox spirit] spoke in riddles and wrote in a cloud script. Sometimes when [the daughter] sat in meditation in the oratory, the various deities descended....Xijue distorted the story and thought she was divine. He embellished upon the story. The Wanli emperor and the Empress Dowager Li heard of it, and suddenly

32 See for example the treatment offered by Deng Zhicheng (b.1887). Deng writes that Tan Qian provides the only account which contradicts Wang Shizhen's version of events, but then goes on to quote Tan's account in its entirety, after having simply said that Wang Shizhen said that Tanyangzi was an immortal. *Gudeng suoji quanbian* (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1955), juan 1, pp.19-20.

the fox went into hiding. It came out no more, and the numinous music stopped.

After the emperor hears of the fox-spirit, it vanishes and the celestial music is heard no more. The magical part of the story is over. Tan Qian implies that the story of immortality has as its purpose to conceal the fact that the girl was possessed by a fox.

But, according to Tan Qian, the daughter of the Grand Secretary Wang and the lady Zhu did not vanish into immortality. A failed immortal, a daughter visited by fox spirits, remained behind. Marriage seemed a likely solution to the problem, and a nameless young man from Shaoxing was bribed to marry her and conceal her identity. But when a neighbor inflamed by her beauty attacked her, she blurted out the truth, that she was in fact the daughter of Grand Secretary Wang Xijue. The lady Zhu, doubtless fearing that this would give rise to further gossip, had Tanyangzi removed to the home of Wang Mengzhou, an uncle of Wang Xijue. The story darkly implies that her family had the girl murdered: “there was the sound of crying from within the uncle’s rooms; suddenly it stopped.” Several months later, the young man from Shaoxing came to find out what happened to his wife. Neither he nor his five companions is heard of again. The family of the grand secretary is implicated in a second murder.³³

Tan Qian ends his narrative by saying that a certain Lou Xi from Siming had pointed out the absurdities in Wang Shizhen’s biography of Tanyangzi and that Tu Long had asked the city god to curse Lou Xi for his blasphemy. Later, the shrine to Tanyangzi was destroyed by thunder. The shrine is destroyed and the blasphemer is spared. Tan Qian finds the judgment of the gods to be clear.

33 Tan Qian, *Caolin zazu*, contained in *Biji xiaoshuo daguan* (Yangzhou: Guangling guji keyin she, 1984), vol. 16, p. 185 (section heji, p. 415a).

Tu Long's memorial to the city god survives, in his collected works. It is a remarkable document, not so much for what it reveals about the nature of the gossip (he is discreet about the vulgar stories), but for what it reveals about the interplay of the human and divine worlds in Tu Long's religious imagination. Tu begins the memorial, "I request the city god to send heavenly officials to punish the depraved and smite the evil in order to make clear divine principles and to startle human hearts."³⁴

He continues that he personally knows that Tanyangzi was pure and chaste, and that she studied the dao, engaged in self cultivation and ultimately attained the dao. She was arrayed with the immortals ten thousand people had seen her ascend heavenward in broad daylight. As Tu puts it with uncharacteristic understatement, "one might say that this is confirmation of her saintliness."

He goes on to chronicle the merits of Tanyangzi: those who merely heard of her mended their ways. She was a moral force in the mortal world, a being beyond slander. Tu continues his request to the city god:

If you do not punish [Lou Xi], then deluded people will find it hard to become enlightened. They will not believe in the Immortal Masters and will not respect the gods. They will regard theories of recompense and retribution for good and evil as nonsense, and heaven and hell as lies.³⁵

Thus, Tu Long argues, blasphemy undermines the very structure of religious sanction for morality. Without belief in deities (and in Tanyangzi specifically) the whole moral fiber of society would collapse. Tu reiterates his point if the blasphemy is not punished, then, "Ordinary people will believe that there are no Buddhas and immortals and that moral

34 Hongbao ji, 47/19a.

35 Hongbao ji, 47/20a.

cultivation is a joke.”³⁶

He explains the urgent need for immediate intervention:

There are two modes of divine principles of reward and punishment: guobao (果報 fruit retribution), which occurs after death, and huabao (花報 flower retribution), which occurs during life. Guobao occurs frequently but huabao, rarely. Retribution after death is obscure and hard to understand. Retribution in this life is clear and awesome.³⁷

The stakes for Tu Long are high: if the city god fails to smite the blasphemer, the entire moral order of society is at risk.

Tu Long's uncharacteristic silence about what Lou Xi might have said leaves us in the dark, but other contemporaries are more than willing to give us the details of the gossip. Tan Qian's murky accusations recall a version of events discussed explicitly by both the noted essayist Shen Defu³⁸ and Shen Zan, the younger brother of the playwright Shen Jing 沈璟(1553-1610, js 1574).³⁹ Both Shen Defu and Shen Can assert that several years after Tanyangzi's death a former concubine of Wang Dingjue, Xijue's brother, appeared and claimed to be Tanyangzi.

Shen Defu tells the story:⁴⁰

Shortly after Wang Xijue became grand secretary [i.e. 1585], there were those who said that Tanyangzi was still alive. At first nobody much believed it, but then there appeared a person from Yin named Lou.⁴¹ He called himself a student. A practitioner of feng shui, he came

36 Hongbao ji, 47/21a.

37 Hongbao ji, 47/22a.

38 See his biography by Tsung-han Yang in the Dictionary of Ming Biography, pp. 1190-1191.

39 See the biography of Shen Jing by Mingshui Hung in Dictionary of Ming Biography, pp. 1172-1173.

40 Yehuo bian, juan 23, p. 593.

41 Peter Ditmanson (personal communication) suggests that it is possible that this person

to the Suzhou area, bringing with him a wife and two children. They had no fixed abode.

His wife was clever, beautiful and crafty. Moreover, she spoke the Suzhou dialect. She collected so much wealth that bandit-catchers were suspicious of her. They were hot in pursuit of her, and she reckoned that she could not escape. Finally she said: "I am from Taicang and my name is Wang. How dare you be so rude!" From this time on, with great fanfare, she claimed to be Tanyangzi.

When the story reached Loujiang,⁴² Wang Xijue was at court and his son Heng was with him. Only an uncle, a provincial degree holder named Mengzhou, was at home looking after family affairs. They arrested this woman along with her husband and children and took them there. They questioned her and she said: "I am the true Tanyang. That day I did not actually die. I escaped from a hole in the back of the shrine." Even Mengzhou could not tell for sure [if she was Tanyangzi]. Because of this, she even more adamantly insisted that she was Xijue's daughter. The Suzhou area was bubbling like a cauldron with people telling this strange story. But old servants, friends and colleagues of the Wang family who knew of the affair doubted that it was true. They examined and interrogated her for a long time, and finally concluded: "Aren't you the girl from the second gentleman's [i.e. Wang Dingjue's] chamber?" At that time her color changed and she blurted out the truth. It turned out that she had been the concubine of Xijue's brother, Dingjue. When Dingjue had died, she fled at night with his property. We do not know where she met Lou and subsequently married him. The two children were his. This was all four years ago.

is the Lou Xi of Tu Long's memorial. Both men are from Yin xian. It is of course impossible to know for sure, but that the seducer of the concubine and the blasphemer might be one and the same is an intriguing possibility.

42 The area in Taicang where the Wang family lived.

From when she was first taken to be Tanyangzi by people, she took advantage of the error. She hoped that the Wang family would let her go to avoid messy complications. She did not count on anyone recognizing her.

Mengzhou had a runner bind her and take her to the capital to put her on trial. But that woman seduced the runner, and taking advantage of his drunkenness and lassitude, escaped into the night with the two children and Lou. For a long time now, nothing has been heard of them.

I once asked Wang Heng: "After your sister ascended, were there ever any manifestations of her?" He said: "Absolutely not." I would imagine that he was resentful that an imposter had besmirched her good name. For that reason he kept secret the details.⁴³

The imposter, the former concubine of the dead Dingjue, casts doubts on the story in a way that the impeachment did not. The impeachers, Niu and Sun, challenged Tanyangzi's divinity, but did not go so far as to suggest that she might be a fraud. Dingjue was, according to Shen Defu, a late convert to the cult; perhaps his concubine learned from him the skepticism as well as the details that made the charade possible.⁴⁴ The seclusion of women as practiced among the upper classes in Ming China facilitated the charade. Mengzhou may well have not been familiar enough with the person of either Tanyangzi or the concubine to recognize the imposter for what she was.

The imposter is greedy and she is crafty. Her greed has put her in a position which arouses suspicion. As a way of deflecting suspicion, she asserts that she is a member of the Taicang Wang family. She does not

43 Yehuo bian, juan 23, p. 594.

44 Yehuo bian, juan 23, p. 594. For more indication of Dingjue's skepticism, see his biography in the *Zhongzhen Taicang zhou zhi*, 13/64b-65a.

claim to be Tanyangzi immediately. It is only after local people (among whom rumors that Tanyangzi was still alive had been circulating) clamorously acclaim her to be Tanyangzi does she herself begin making the claim. And we have seen claims that she would return voiced by Tu Long and Wang Shizhen almost from the moment of her death.

The irony in her claim to membership in the Wang family is of course that as Dingjue's concubine she had been a member of the family. She is claiming an identity that had once been hers, however marginally. But the connections with the Wang family had vanished at Dingjue's death. A widowed wife would have had a certain status within the family of her dead husband. As long as she did not remarry, her claim to a limited share of the resources of her late husband's family would have been relatively secure, in theory if not always in practice.⁴⁵ But a concubine had no such assurances. And fleeing at night with the dead man's property was an effective way of insuring the eradication of any sentimental ties with the Wang family which might have made her position more secure.

The story of the imposter can be seen as a concubine's revenge: as a success she would have been ensconced as the daughter of one of the most prominent families of the Jiangnan region, with a status higher than that which she had during Dingjue's lifetime. As a failed imposter, she attacks both the sanctity and the virtue of the daughter she pretended to be: she is a seductress who crawled out of a hole in the back of the shrine. She is beautiful; she is greedy; she is sexually ruthless. It is no wonder the Wang family chose to silence the details.

45 See my "Widows and Remarriage in Ming and early Qing China," in *Women in China* Richard Guisso and Stanley Johannsen eds. (New York: Philo Press, 1981), pp. 129-146; Mark Elvin, "Female Virtue and the State in China," *Past and Present* 104 (1984), pp. 111-152; Susan Mann, "Widows in the Kinship, Class and Community Structures of Qing Dynasty China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 46:1 (1987), pp. 37-56.

Another version of the story of the imposter is told by Shen Zan in his *Jinshi congcan* 近事叢殘:⁴⁶

Wang Dingjue, an Education Intendent Censor from Taicang, went to Melon County (i.e. Yangzhou) to buy a maid. Her name was Juicy Melons. After he died, a family servant changed his name and took her to be his own concubine. He concealed her deeply within his room in the countryside. But after a while, the story was gradually spread on the outside. He was afraid that his master would find out about it, so he sold her yet again.

Subsequently she became a prostitute in Zhe. There was a rogue from Zhe who frequented bawdy houses and became intimate with her. He asked her and found out about her native place. She was able to speak of affairs in the household of Wang Xijue. He marveled at it, and said: "Aren't you the one they used to call Tanyang?" She said, "I am." Thereupon he spread word among outsiders, and called himself the son-in-law of the Wang family, and moreover wrote poems and songs to further their story. Soon there were rumors all over. How deplorable!⁴⁷

Shen Can gives us no information as to how he learned the details of the story. We do know that his family came from Wujiang, south of Suzhou, where there would have been easy access to gossip about the odd events in the household of the Grand Secretary Wang.

This story differs in significant ways from that of Shen Defu: Indeed, Shen Can's main interest seems to be in the time that elapses between the death of Wang Dingjue and the liaison with the rouge from Zhe. Shen Defu's portrayal of the imposter is of a smart, sexy woman who embarrasses her social betters and gets the last word, by escaping and by

46 See the biography of his brother, Shen Jing (Shen Ching) in the *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, pp. 1172-1173.

47 *Jinshi congcan*, p. 16.

rendering Tanyangzi, in Wang Heng's eyes at least, a topic of some embarrassment. Shen Can's imposter, Juicy Melons, is less an architect of her own fate. At her master's death, this imposter flees not with family property, but with a servant. Whether she eloped or was abducted, we do not know. However the relationship began, it ended when he sold her into prostitution. But as in Shen Defu's version of the story, the imposture does not seem to be Juicy Melons' own idea. The scoundrel she meets at the brothel marvels at her intimate knowledge of the Wang household—it is only in response to his direct question that she asserts that she is Tanyangzi. He crassly manipulates her image for his own gain.

Conclusion: Privacy and Sentiment, Concealing and Revealing

The particular stories told by Shen Defu and Shen Cong may not have been the precise rumors that Tanyangzi's followers were anxious to quell, but they give us a sense of the kind of rumors that were prevalent shortly after her death. The nature of the damage done by the slander is eloquently argued by Tu Long in his memorial to the city god. It is necessary that the story be told correctly; what is at stake is nothing less than the moral order.

What does privacy mean in such a context? What do revealing and concealing mean? The word *si* 私 is never used in the Tanyang dashi zhuan; one would not expect it to be used, as its Ming connotations are mainly negative. Tanyangzi manages to organize her life in a way that enables her religious practice through her claim of widowhood and because she has managed to convince her family, her father in particular, of her sanctity. But I think in a profound sense, her work is not private. It is connected to the community of the spirit world and the community of her followers, which is, I suppose another way of saying that it is connected to the tradition of Daoist revelation. Indeed, at one point in her

visionary experience, Tanyangzi is reprimanded by her teachers for jumping to conclusions. They ask her if she thinks that the dao resides in her own understanding – the implication being clear that there is something larger, that there is indeed a Dao. One final point, before I conclude. One of the characteristics of spirit-wandering, which Tanyangzi does, is the way in which it merges interiority and the external world—the external world is perceived as being present within an individual’s body, but that does not make it less external. But it does render ordinary notions of public and private, of revealing and concealing, problematic. The body of Tanyangzi is on the one hand, chaste, almost cloistered in her upper-class domestic setting; but on the other hand, it soars above the rooftops, and her spirit visits courts of immortals and goes spirit wandering, the end result of which is to reveal to her that all that she has beheld resides within her own body.

The connection with the spirit world, and with the Daoist tradition, means that her disciples cannot reveal everything, even if they so chose. The concealing we see operating here is not, however, to maintain Tanyangzi’s privacy; it is because secrets can be transmitted only to those who have had proper initiation. It may be, after all, that Tanyangzi has no privacy; as the bearer of revelations from the world of the immortals she has forfeited ordinary discretion. And so has her father in participating in the production and distribution of these texts. Her disciples are anxious to tell her story, so as to prevent other, unauthorized versions, from circulating as mere gossip. Despite the elaborate calculus of concealing and revealing, they do not succeed.

曇陽子傳略論

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摘 要

本文通過對王錫爵之女，年輕的宗教老師曇陽子的研究（1557-1580），意在探討遮罩於閨閣內與呈現於閨閣外的問題。曇陽子生平主要資料《曇陽大師傳》收錄於王世貞《弇州山人續稿》。本文通過對《曇陽大師傳》的創作過程的甄別，發現此文乃是王世貞與王錫爵合作的產物。此傳記通過曇陽子拜訪西山王母，並於萬曆八年九月最終得道升天化仙的描述，再現了曇陽子宗教信仰形成過程。通過對傳播與貶抑曇陽子傳教的文章之爬梳，本文發現其弟子（包括其父親）書寫《曇陽大師傳》意在控制攻擊者對其誹謗。因為在此事件中，藏於閨內並不能使其名節得到益處。本文認為作為宗教教師要求曇陽子呈現於其信徒眼中並可以接觸到。曇陽子的宗教活動表明在宗教傳授過程中，她並未遵循通常的隱身於閨閣內的原則。

關鍵字：宗教、道教、婦女、明朝

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