Precarious Voices: The Political Act of Transmission in Feng Menglong's *Mountain Songs* Compendium (c. 1610)

Leigh K Jenco

At times of political catastrophe, what spaces remain for disenfranchised voices? This essay explores an early seventeenth-century compendium of urban folksongs, compiled by Feng Menglong (1574–1646), to explore a new kind of political action outside the institutions of the state—the act of transmission, that is, the recording of materials from the past or present for the moral cultivation of posterity. When Feng inserts non-elite voices into this process by recording and transmitting their poetry in a textual record that takes account of their regional and oral features, inflected by differences of class and gender, his act is both inclusive and meaningfully political. Feng's act of transmission sustains voices—including those of the marginalized—whose circumstances otherwise render them precarious. Transmission thus draws attention to the forward-looking acts that can shape future practice and theory, on the basis of the very voices being obstructed by the mainstream realities of their time.

In times of crisis and catastrophe that defy hope for progress, and when typical routes to political change seem indefinitely obstructed for all but the most well connected, what actions remain to secure the most precarious voices in our community? In this article I find answers to this question in an unlikely place: the early seventeenth-century folksong collection *Mountain Songs* (*Shan'ge* 山歌), recorded by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646). Feng's collection transmitted the sung poems of urban laborers (including textile workers, prostitutes, courtesans, and fishermen) in his hometown Suzhou, one of the largest cities of the early modern world. Many of the poems are sung from female points of view, often with explicitly erotic themes. I argue that this collection demonstrates a politically meaningful intervention outside the institutions of the state—the act of transmission (*shù* 述 or *chuán* 傳); that is, the recording and often the recovery of materials—textual, oral, ritual, or otherwise—from the past or present that are intended for the moral cultivation of posterity. From the time of Confucius, transmission was associated with the reproduction of Chinese literary and philosophical orthodoxy, including the state institutions that such orthodoxy supported and relied on for enforcement. But Feng shows how acts of transmission can also enable a redirection of moral authority toward marginal figures whose voices challenge rather than reinforce dominant hierarchies. Working amid the explosion of commercial print in early modern China, Feng poses transmission as a means of platforming marginalized voices at a time when the proliferation of new media threatened to foreclose them.[1]

Acts such as Feng's signal the unexpected possibilities afforded by a more granular and historically attentive reading of the so-called Confucian tradition, whose adherents and critics (including Confucius himself) were often more preoccupied with matters of historical and literary transmission than with the abstract, often essentialized, principles of "filial piety, respect for elders, ancestor worship, ritual propriety, and social harmony" upheld by

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current-day reconstructions of Confucianism in political theory (e.g., Chan 2014; Kim 2015, 187). Transmission disrupts these reconstructions, by drawing attention to the acts that sustain and transform bodies of thought and to how those acts can enable (or occlude) inclusion, multivocality, and critical reflection. Engaging instead "a field of literary practice and theory which grew up alongside, and sometimes in opposition to, scholarship on the 'Confucian' canon" (Rusk 2012, 9), Feng's acts of transmission preserve exemplars meant to endure beyond the time horizons of individuals, generations, or even regimes. Such practices sustain voices, including those of the marginalized, whose circumstances otherwise render them precarious. Transmission thus draws attention to the forward-looking acts that can shape future practice and theory on the basis of those voices when (*especially* when) they face insurmountable obstruction. Far from assuming the existence of a transhistorical (and often elite) set of principles that drive a "tradition" of political thinking, I argue that transmission offers new ways by which we might sustain future spaces for the most precarious voices of our present time.

My reading takes seriously Feng's claim that the *Mountain Songs* collection should be seen as parallel to the *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), a canonical collection of ancient folksongs and court elegies that stood as a guiding text for Chinese moral theory. The *Odes* and its prefaces grounded the long-held view that *wen* ("literature"), not the institutions of the state, was the primary mechanism of moral self-cultivation and social betterment through its ethical regulation of human affect in its consumption and production. Poetry was seen as a particularly privileged site through which human emotions were expressed, regulated, and brought into coherence with the same normative patterns, or *dao*, that guided both the natural world as well as human practice and institutions.[2] When Feng inserts non-elite, largely illiterate voices into this process by recording and transmitting their poetry in a textual record that takes account of their regional and oral features, as inflected by differences of class and gender, his act is both inclusive and meaningfully political. Such acts are "political" not because they resemble action in state-adjacent spaces but because they engage "the distinct problematic of the values and powers binding collectivities" (Brown 2002, 570). These acts intervene specifically in the field of expression (namely, *wen*) that is widely seen as constitutive of a shared moral community across time. Transmitting urban folksongs situates their voices within that shared community, even as the act does not speak for or on behalf of the voices it records; rather, transmission affirms the morally valuable work they are already doing and secures it for future emulation.

In what follows, I situate Feng and his *Mountain Songs* compendium amid the explosion of commercial print and urban expansion that marked Chinese early modernity, before going on to examine how Feng presents his compendium within a deep genealogy of politically charged literary production. The songs' metaphoric use of everyday objects and tools challenges the elite fixation on certain kinds of sites or architecture in narrating urban life in Suzhou, even as their voices limn an otherwise unacknowledged form of "theory," understood as critical reflection on everyday experience. Feng offers a distinct perspective on literary quality that draws from historical precedents but departs from his contemporaries in articulating the precarity of literary work as linked more to inequalities of power than to its moral worth—themes developed in the songs themselves through the metaphor of unwanted pregnancy. I conclude by considering an example of how transmission can distinctively attend to marginalized voices in our own time and place who, facing their own unwanted pregnancies, are likewise at risk of falling into oblivion. Transmission can situate these voices as theoretically generative for a point in the future less precarious than the present.

The Mountain Songs and Their Context

The *Mountain Songs* intervened in a complex social and literary environment marked by the explosion of commercial print fed by the unprecedented growth of both population and wealth throughout the Ming empire in the sixteenth century. The Ming witnessed socioeconomic transformations that paralleled those elsewhere in the world, fueled in part by influxes of foreign trade, including silver from South American mines exchanged by Portuguese traders for Chinese silks and porcelain (Brook 1998; Fletcher 1995). The social and geographical mobility, commodification of print, and rapidity of urbanization that followed in the wake of these drastic changes situate the late Ming as part of a global early modernity, a time when writers and thinkers remained preoccupied with issues of authenticity, status, and wealth (Handler-Spitz 2019).

These developments were acutely felt in Jiangnan, the region of the lower Yangzi delta, where Suzhou prospered from its location on the Grand Canal. By the mid-1500s, Suzhou was among the largest cities in the world, rivaled only by London and Tokyo in size. Its wealth was built on a burgeoning textile and dyeing industry, and its economy depended crucially on an underclass of craftsmen and laborers (including those involved in sex work), some of whom migrated from rural villages to work in the urban center (Mote 1973, 55). It was these laborers whose sung poems constitute the first four sections of the *Mountain Songs*; they take up ordinary objects such as spindles, shuttles, fishing nets, and dye stones as metaphors to express their singers' intensity of emotion.[3] The majority of the 347 songs featured in the collection were sung in Wu 吳, a Sinitic language spoken across parts of Jiangsu

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and Zhejiang provinces and in the urban centers of Suzhou and Hangzhou.[4]

The first song in the collection, "Laughter," is perhaps the poem in the collection most analyzed by modern commentators and showcases key features of *Mountain Songs* (see, e.g., Feng 2005, 320–21; Lowry 2005a, 540; and Ōki and Santangelo 2011, 65–66).

> The south-easterly [that is, springtime] wind blows in at a slant,
> And a fresh flower opens among the leaves
> But do not laugh happily, young wife!
> How many secret love affairs come from such laughter! (Feng 1993b, 1.1)[5]

The addressee of the poem is a young woman who has presumably been tempted into a secret love affair (*siqing* 私情), a romantic pairing outside parentally approved marriage. As do other songs in the collection, "Laughter" is told in the third person but likely acknowledges the personal feelings of the singer herself—boldly positioning a young girl as an *agent*, rather than an object, of sexual passion (Wu 2010, 327). Indeed, *Mountain Songs* records several examples of the lengths to which young women would go to deceive their parents about their secret assignations—such as in the poem "Clever":

> Mother is clever, but daughter is clever too.
> Mother has spread lime all over the floor
> So little old me carries my boyfriend to bed on my back
> Two people leave only one set of footprints. (1.22)

Other poems give advice from a married woman's perspective on how to hide evidence of an affair and to conceal one's passionate emotions in public (1.27a–e). In yet others, women's sexual desire for men is elaborated using metaphors, such as "coveting flowers" (*tanhua* 貪花), that are typically only used to describe male passion for women or concubines:

> Winding up his headscarf for the first time, he pokes some flowers in.
> Seeing them, the young miss immediately reaches out her hand to take them.
> Before she can reach the flowers, the lad touches her breasts.
> The lad covets white breasts, the young miss covets flowers. (2.47)

These poems and others like them invert literary tropes that mirror the subordinate sexual and domestic position of women in Chinese society, affirming instead the possibility of erotic passion initiated by females outside marriage.[6]

Mountain Songs joined other works in Feng's corpus in celebrating the capacity of *qing* 情—"sentiment" or "emotion"—to guide ethical human relationships. As we have seen, often these visions centered the erotic, including homosexual love and concubinage. Yet Feng and some of his contemporaries, most famously Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602) (2009b), used the term *qing* to indicate a much broader range of beneficial human affect whose "authenticity" (*zhen* 真), in their view, should take precedence over ritual prescription and sclerotic literary forms for guiding human relationships (Feng 1993a, Lee 2011, 7–8; Li Zhi 2009b). These views on *qing* reflect those of the early philosopher Mencius, who argued that human communities and relationships should be guided by precognitive, spontaneous moral intuitions that constituted a shared "human nature" (*xing* 性), rather than by the contingencies of social convention that too often overrode them (*Mencius* 6A; Graham 1967). Mencius's views created a tension for the Confucians of Feng's day, who saw the expression of *qing* as lending necessary contextual nuance and authenticity to the otherwise generic moral prescriptions of "human nature," but whose very particularity and instability challenged those same prescriptions (Huang 2001, 48–51).

Despite the key role played by Feng's work in these philosophical debates, he has become known primarily for his transvaluation of romantic and sexual desire in works such as *The History of* Qing (*Qingshi* 情史), which collected and reworked vernacular tales of romance, infidelity, and marital relations. Modern commentators tend to view the *Mountain Songs*, alongside Feng's larger output, as an expression of elite connoisseurship or entertainment in an age of unprecedented commercial expansion. Kathryn Lowry (2005b, 7), for example, has argued that the promotion of "passion" and self-gratification in work such as Feng's was "not the cause for the growing interest in love and self-gratification…but a symptom of a shift in the economy of desire" similar to that emerging in early modern Europe: the luxury of reading and performing such songs was evidence of the extent to which even desire became something to be "bought and sold" (see also Ōki and Santangelo 2011, ix).

The implication of these readings is that Feng's collection of folksongs was primarily encouraged by the new opportunities for elite entertainment afforded by commercial printing, rather than by any ethical attempt to showcase the voices of non-elites or the value of their literary production (Chow 2004, 26; Lowry 2005b, 44, 47). However, without denying the importance of the socioeconomic transformations that enabled Feng to circulate his collection in print, we might read him as contributing to the wider reassessment of moral conventions ongoing within contemporary vernacular literature. Novels such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* and dramas such as *Peony Pavilion* presented complex and multilayered accounts of

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characters at every level of society. Spanning everyday situations to imaginative dreamworlds, these works invited critical examination of ethics, social roles, and identity in late Ming China (Lu 2001). Feng's own stated intentions for his folksong collection likewise support his interventions in a range of contexts beyond ephemeral entertainment.

The Precedents of Transmission: The *Odes* and the *Mountain Songs*

The title page of the only surviving Ming-era copy of the *Mountain Songs*, currently in the Beijing Library, notes it was "transmitted (*shu* 述) by the Proprietor of the Inked Innocent Studio [Publishing House]" (i.e., Feng Menglong; see the facsimile reproduction in Feng 1993b). This small but significant notation was left off subsequent reprintings of his work, but it marks the *Mountain Songs* as a specific kind of textual production: one that records for transmission, rather than edits or narrates.[7] By Feng's time, transmission was a well-established practice in East Asian textual traditions, where it typically acted to preserve a culturally privileged textual heritage across time or, less frequently, through space. Editors and redactors often identified transmission as a practice through which they could both demonstrate their moral discernment in selecting texts for transmission and secure for the future the values and lessons of the past (Henderson 1991; Makeham 2003). In this sense, transmission was not intended as an act of translation or alteration, but it did endow the text with new status. In Pure Land Buddhist traditions, transmitting and circulating doctrinal texts were means of gaining karmic merit for the next life (Cherniack 1994, 21). In orthodox neo-Confucianism (*daoxue* 道學), transmission often entailed linking readers to an intellectual genealogy identified with a specific lineage of teaching and texts (called *daotong* 道統 ["transmission of the *dao*"]; Henderson 1991, 11, 29; Wilson 1995, chap. 2).

Texts were not the only mode of transmission. Poetry, vernacular short stories, and exegetical instruction were often delivered orally and transmitted over centuries. Guan Dedong (1987, 248) has shown that at least one song lyric in the *Mountain Songs* collection dates to the twelfth century. Modern ethnomusicologists have confirmed that the distinctive features of rhythm, form, theme and performance as recorded by Feng still figured prominently in mountain songs of the Wu region as late as the 1980s (Schimmelpenninck 1997, 37–38). These realities suggest that the transmission of the mountain songs was self-sustaining, albeit through precariously fragmented and local oral transmission among urban laborers. Many of Feng's elite contemporaries documented the existence of such songs among their household staff or in the streets and assumed that their transmission to the future would be secured by their sheer authenticity and pervasiveness (e.g., Fan 1928, 2:8a; Li Kaixian 2014, 566). Yuan Hongdao (c. 1573, 22a), for example, argued, "If anything [of today's poetry and prose] happens to be transmitted (*chuan* 傳), it might well be what commoner women and children nowadays sing," leaving behind the less worthy elite poetry that clung too heavily to archaic forms.

In his preface to the *Mountain Songs*, Feng (1993b, 1–2) offers his own view of transmission, including why he transmits these oral songs in textual form:

> Since the dawn of writing, every dynasty had [oral] songs and ballads; these were presented alongside [written works] and collectively called *feng ya* ("airs and elegances") by historians, elevating them to a place of value. But once the *Qu Sao* of Chu and the regulated verse of the Tang dynasty began vying for favor, the sounds of the common people and their temperament were no longer taken note of in poetic circles. For this reason, they were marked off as "mountain songs," by which was meant the gems that would emerge casually from the mouths of farmers and rural children. These were not discussed by literati or scholars.
>
> The lack of attention in poetic circles, and the lack of discussion by literati or scholars, was all it took; the more the prestige of such songs was undermined, the more the heart of the songs themselves became ever more shallow. By now all that circulates are songbooks of [songs relating to] secret love affairs. However, from amid the mulberry forests and the banks of the Pu River [in the state of Wei, where lovers were known to congregate and sing], the Airs of the States pierced through, and Confucius recorded them. This shows that the authentic emotion [of these songs] cannot be invalidated. Although mountain songs have long been buried, are they not like the remnant music of [the ancient states of] Zheng and Wei?

This rich statement requires much unpacking. From the first lines of the preface, Feng sketches a history of decline from a time when (oral) popular songs and customary "airs" were "placed alongside" literary elite compositions to the present era, "when the sounds of the common people and their temperament were no longer taken note of in poetic circles." Far from taking the transmission of mountain songs for granted, as many of his contemporaries did, Feng worries that their subordinate position within a hierarchy of worthy literature may lead them to be "buried."

Placing poetry within a history of its production starting from the Zhou dynasty or—as Feng does here—from "the dawn of writing" is a common claim of premodern Chinese poetic criticism (e.g., Yuan 2008; see also Rusk 2012, 49–50, 53). What is unusual is how Feng positions these "mountain songs" as legitimate components of poetic development, rather than merely a means by which, for example, lower classes expressed their emotions and grievances. Even the history of Chinese poetry offered by Bai Juyi, the legendary Tang poet known for his political and social criticism, reduces the songs of "those below" to a means of emotional revelation, rather than aesthetic expression (Yu 1987, 178). In contrast, Feng expresses disappointment at the forced separation of commoner-sung poetry from literary production that was facilitated by their

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characterization as mere "mountain songs." Diminishing their value led to the decline in the quality and authenticity of both folksongs and literary writing and gave rise to the phenomenon that Feng (1993b, 1) calls "fake poetry and prose" by writers obsessed with satisfying literary convention at the expense of authentic sentiment (*qing*).

In the face of this neglect, Feng describes his work on the *Mountain Songs* as analogous to that undertaken by Confucius, who was historically held to have collected folksongs for transmission in what would eventually become the canonical *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經; also called the *Classic of Poetry*). The Airs of the States, mentioned by Feng in his preface, was the first section of the *Odes*. It collected rural folksongs from the regionally disparate states under Zhou dynastic authority and was traditionally held to be part of those editorial efforts to record ancient culture that Confucius famously described as "transmitting but not creating" (*Analects* 7.1). Feng argues that, despite the humble origins of these oral ballads, Confucius recognized their "authentic emotion" and effectively validated their worth as worthy literature—in this case, as part of the category of *shi* (詩 poetry)—by recording them for future transmission.[8] By recording these songs in texts that would ensure their circulation beyond their time and place, Feng—like Confucius—exercises the same discernment and appreciation of the "authentic emotion" uniquely conveyed by these songs.

But there is more at stake in Feng's positioning his transmission of the *Mountain Songs* as a parallel to work undertaken by Confucius on the *Odes*. As a canonical text that was necessary reading for the civil examinations in late imperial China, the *Odes* was never seen as a compartmentalized text with relevance only to literature or poetry. Rather, it was a key basis for how Chinese thinkers considered the relationship between emotional attunement and moral cultivation, including how past texts and practices seen to facilitate such attunement might inform the shape of contemporary human society. The *Odes* was the linchpin of what Stephen Owen (1996, xiv) called "the great Confucian project of educating the human heart back to its natural goodness"; its poetry ensured that "if a person heard the songs performed… the emotions of the listener would be shaped to decent, balanced, and at the same time, natural responses to the events of life." Poetry was seen as the form of human practice that more than any other—whether ritual, literary production, or political institution-building—enjoyed particular efficacy over how human beings could relate to their world and by extension to those around them.

These connections help explain precisely why it is that poetry—in its oral, written, and sung forms—has such political force in late Ming China and how transmission of it constitutes a political act. Significantly, the moral and aesthetic theories that emerged from centuries of engagement with the *Odes* and its prefaces resulted in poetic ideals distinct from those articulated in other traditions, such as those that draw from Greek (typically Platonic) sources. In contrast to the suspicions Plato raises in the *Republic* (596a–598b), that poetry misleads with images unrelated to the timeless and permanent truth of the forms (Moss 2007), Chinese literary and poetic theory tended to reiterate a morally beneficial continuity between aesthetics, experience, and politics. In the most classic and well-cited formulation of Chinese poetic theory, "poems [specifically in the style of the *Shijing*] speak the moral disposition" (*shi yan zhi* 詩言志). That is, poems were manifestations or disclosures of broader patterns of the universe and their appropriate human dispositions (*zhi* 志; Yu 1987, 31–33). To "speak" these dispositions was to express them in the prosodic utterances of poetry.

In early China, the outer process of manifestation of this *zhi* was called *wen* 文, "literary patterning," a term later used to refer to "literature" in general (Owen 1992, 25). To transmit this *wen* across time meant ensuring access to its morally nourishing features for future readers. In this context, poetry was important politically because it was seen as a device of regulation: its consumption and composition were crucially important to human community, because poetic activities regulated (and did not merely register or express) appropriate emotions and responses to the lived world. The production and consumption of poetry were always moral practices, accessible to anyone, that included but often went well beyond any specific message conveyed in the poem itself. The capacity of a poem to be both aesthetically pleasing and emotionally moving turned on the moral insight of the person composing it, whether in text or orally in the case of illiterate persons and more often in the early centuries of poetic tradition. Steven van Zoeren (1991, 13–14) linked these capacities of poetry, especially the *Odes*, to its origins in pre-Confucian "word magic": spells and incantations that invoked a vision of the social world and so hoped to remake it.

These transformative powers were not only directed at others but also at oneself. Neo-Confucian thinkers since the Song dynasty used the careful study of the *Odes* as a means of cultivating in their readers the sentiments that motivated their utterance (Van Zoeren 1991, 14). The most influential articulation of this view came from the neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1980, "xu," 1), who argued that careful study of the *Odes* can give expression to human emotions and speech, aligning them with the behavior and relationships inscribed by ritual prescription. Zhu's reading remained authoritative until the nineteenth century. In Feng's time, it was a key touchstone in debates about the use of vernacular expressions in literary works, in part because Zhu recognized the *Odes* as being a record of everyday commoner speech. Feng's own plea for recognizing the value of "the sounds of the common people" relied on this widely acknowledged connection between

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ancient odes and contemporary folk songs since the Song dynasty. Feng's contemporary Shen Defu 沈德符 (2012, 545–46; 1578–1642), for example, notes that folk songs dating to the Yuan dynasty continued to circulate in northern regions and beyond and were deemed by the literary giants Li Mengyang 李夢陽 (1473–1530) and He Jingming 何景明 (1483–1521) as worthy successors to the Airs of the States.

Yet, significant differences of opinion existed in late Ming literary circles as to just how contemporary folksongs might be linked to ancient canonical poems. Li and He tended to endorse the view that both folksongs and ancient odes conformed to cosmic patterns of breath, rhyme, and aesthetic quality that coalesced to inspire uniquely powerful resonance with both the author and the reader (or listener) of poetry (Ong 2016, 250–51). But their own engagement with folksongs tended to be more patronizing than ethnographic or descriptive. Li, for example, reworked ballads (*yuefu* 樂府) sung by commoners, including refugees, not out of concern for their lived experience but rather to develop his own poetic expression (267–70). Even for those poets for whom contemporary styles and vernacular language were critical to the production of authentic poems, such as Yuan Hongdao, folksongs were primarily a source of inspiration—a means of "accumulating a great collection of poetry, expanding the heart for poetry, and broadening poetic vision," rather than having independent worth (Yuan 1990a, 30; see also Chou 1988, 77).

A careful reading of Feng's preface suggests a contrasting view, which eschews the idea that the mountain songs were valuable because they emulate cosmically universal models of poetic composition. To the contrary, his allusions to the *Odes* suggest an analogy with the *Mountain Songs* based on the marginality and heterogeneity of their expressions of *qing*. The "remnant music of Zheng and Wei" to which Feng likens his folksongs in the preface name the very sections of the *Odes* that Zhu Xi struggled to incorporate into his moralizing reading of the text. Zheng and Wei were ancient states with little cultural connection to the central Zhou order. The original singers of these ancient lyric poems, who reputedly sung love songs "from amid the mulberry forests and the banks of the Pu river," reflected their distinctive time, place, gender, and class when they elegized subjects—female sexuality, love affairs outside or prior to marriage, and diverse local customs unrelated to Confucian ideas of ritual—that would later confound orthodox Confucian interpreters. These subjects were made illicit by the very moral system Zhu Xi sought to shore up with his reading of the *Odes*, yet they had implicitly received sanction from Confucius when he chose to transmit them as part of this collection. Zhu's solution to this paradox was to declare these poems as useful only for cautionary purposes; their content was too "debauched" (*xie*) to be read for purposes of emotional or moral regulation (Wong and Lee 1989).

Feng's allusion to the "poems of Zheng and Wei" in his preface can be seen as embracing this much disavowed but inescapable heterogeneity within the *Odes* by drawing attention both to the erotic passion of its poems and their cultural divergence from Zhou orthodoxy. His explicit parallel here with similar poems from the *Mountain Songs* signals their rupture with the cultural mainstream of their time, achieved when the singers disclose both "features of [their] own personality and of [their] moral vision that were not exhausted by social reality" (Van Zoeren 1991, 15). The specific content of the mountain songs—their sustained colloquial language, explicitly erotic themes, and diverse, non-elite performative contexts drawn from the canals, brothels, courtesan quarters, textile factories, and workhouses of urban Suzhou—challenge orthodox expectations for poetic content, even as they draw attention to parallel examples in canonical works (Jenco 2024, 71).

The Particularity of the *Mountain Songs*

Some modern scholars have assumed that the *Mountain Songs* compendium offers an elite imitation of commoner folksongs, rather than an accurate record of them. Yet the balance of evidence suggests that Feng was writing the lyrics of the songs down as they were heard.[9] He notes variations on songs to the same tune or theme, and in the rare cases where he changes a line "to make it sound better," he notes the original in his commentary (1.47). When Feng transmits these songs of the largely unlettered in a textual form, he must sacrifice aspects of their contextual performance and local variation. Yet, he preserves their specific details, including transcribing their regional inflections and grammar with a thoroughness unmatched in any premodern Chinese record (Shi 2022, 83–84). In his comment on the first poem in the collection, Feng explains, "In general, the characters *sheng*, *sheng* and *zheng* [at the end of the lines] all follow [the pronunciation of] local speech, to rhyme with [the rhyme categories] *jiang* and *yang*. There are many other such examples, too numerous to note. Wu people sing in Wu [language], in the way that 'tile game' and 'money game' are played in just one region. They need not be like imperial decrees, which must circulate everywhere" (1.1).

When sung in the Wu language local to the Suzhou region, he explains, the rhymes of the song blend harmoniously. In fact, *Mountain Songs* are one of the only pre-twentieth-century Chinese sources written primarily in a regional language and not in the more widely used "official language," *guanhua*; that is, Mandarin (Shi 2022, 59, 81–82). The collection was distinctive even within the burgeoning sphere of vernacular literature, in which authors generally "took some pains to avoid words and idioms with too narrow a currency" (Hanan 1981, 1). The mountain songs' irreducibly local origin leads

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Feng to worry that they may not necessarily be suitable for "circulating everywhere," in the fashion of imperial decrees.

At the same time, emphasizing the local features of poetry does not deny its possibilities for a broader moral or political critique. Interest in vernacular literature was justified by its Ming advocates in part by the undeniable emotive force of colloquial language and experience that reflected the distinctiveness of "the times" (*shi* 時; Yuan 2008; Jiang 2008). But the mountain songs introduce more than just new colloquialisms. Feng's transmission of their voices suggests how the very particularity of experience, including of class and gender, can interrogate the values upheld by established literary hierarchies.

This interrogation is enacted by the poems themselves, whose singers frequently reflect on the very conventions they are in the process of disrupting, as in these two poems, both called "Enticement" (*tou* 偷):

> This girl combs her hair, till it shines like a lacquer bowl,
> In the crowd she will use her feet to lure a boy.
> It used to be said that the boy entices the girl,
> But in the world of this new age, girls entice the boys. (2.39A)

> Having a secret love is nothing to be frightened of,
> Nabbed for fornication, I'll take the rap.
> If it comes to it, I'll kneel before the magistrate,
> Steeling myself I'll confess, "It was I who enticed the boy." (2.39B)

Ōki Yasushi (1997, 133–34), in his analysis of these two poems, admires the vigor and bravery of these girls and suggests that Feng platforms their voices out of sympathy for their bold expressions of emotion (*qing*; see also Wu 2010, 332–33). But in their observation of how deeply their actions disrupt the conventions of their time and place, we see also the exercise of critical reflection on everyday experience that Roxanne Euben (2006, 11) argued constitutes "theory." In a context where elites were obsessed with knowing the most up-to-date language to truly reflect "the times," these singers offer their own comment on the nature of contemporaneity in "this new age" and the kinds of actions appropriate to it—ones in which women have agency to pursue their erotic feelings, even in public spaces such as magistrate courts and urban crowds.

Feng's own commentary invites such a "theoretical" reading, noting that the culture and language "transmitted around the Wu region" 吳中相傳 advance analysis of their own songs (1.16). In a lengthy comment on song 1.2, "Sideways Glances" (*suo* 睃), Feng applies this locally transmitted heritage of critical reflection to the hallowed poetic exemplars of Tang dynasty poetry. The singer invokes a series of carefully articulated metaphors for the expression and achievement of her sexual desire, based on tools used by laborers in Suzhou's booming textile and fishing industries:

> I think of being with you, driving me to distraction
> I need neither matchmaker nor dowry.
> The silk net catches fish, all of them caught up in its eyes [i.e., the holes of the net]
> A thousand silk cloths are produced by the shuttle [*suo*, a homophone for "sideways glances"].

Feng's commentary reads: "'Caught up in its eyes,' 'produced by the shuttle,' such reflective language is most ingenious. It is what the locals call 'double entendre.' This is the same type of thing seen in Tang poetry, such as the lines 'only in spring when the silkworms die will they stop spinning / only when the candle turns to ash will the tears dry.'"

Textiles were an industry that relied heavily on female labor for spinning and weaving within the household. The shuttle would have been an ordinary object encountered everyday by the weavers, most of whom were female. Here the object is invoked by the singer of this poem as a metaphor for male anatomy, which induces a desire so strong that she is willing to forgo established social conventions to satisfy it and at great cost. Feng's comment notes that locals have developed a "reflective language" (*yingyu* 影語) of analysis that names this category of wordplay and self-consciously deploy it in discussing, performing, and appreciating their own poetry. In an interesting reversal of perspective, he goes on to use this reflective language to classify both high and low cultural products—most prominently well-known lines of poetry from the Tang dynasty, widely held in Feng's time to be a source of paradigmatic examples of poesis.

There are other examples of these kinds of reversals in the *Mountain Songs*, particularly when the poems invoke urban sites, whose meaning and creation previously lay wholly within the domain of elite male experience. In early modern China, it was primarily poems and essays, not ruins of the built environment, that served the imaginations of later generations in their experience of landscape. Ruins and other features of the built environment "were not identified by external signs but [are] given a subjective reality: it is the visitor's recognition of a place as a *xu* [ruin] that stimulates emotion and thought" (Hung 2019, 26–27). These formed what Frederick Mote (1973, 53) called "ideological tumuli," reproduced in provincial and urban gazetteers to serve as historical records of local geography. By the late Ming, Suzhou was not only a dominant commercial and cultural urban center throughout East Asia but was also arguably one of the most-elegized cities in the Chinese literary imagination. The reality of its built environment was conveyed in historical records not

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through a list of facts about its material existence but through extracts from literary works that elegized or invoked it (53).

Insofar as it was texts, not physical remains, that stood as guideposts for remembrance of the past (Wang 2003, 488), the *Mountain Songs* do nothing less than reconstruct the urban geography of Suzhou from a non-elite—and often female—point of view. The poems contain few mentions of the "towers, terraces, kiosks and pavilions" that most often prompted orthodox Confucian literary production on themes of nostalgia or emotional transcendence (494–95), and they very rarely focus on the past understood as a collective civilizational enterprise. Instead, they ponder quotidian objects and unexpected features of the built environment, many of them specific to Suzhou and its textile industries, to express a range of feelings—including but going well beyond sexual desire—that would be denied them in conventional society.[10]

For example, the famous Suzhou landmark Tiger Hill, whose short slopes are covered in centuries of literati calligraphy and poetry that "literally inscribe" it as a meaningful landscape (Milburn 2009; for examples, see Wang 1990, 493), is reclaimed instead as a metaphor for a woman's skills at seduction:

> The famous Tiger Hill is not actually very high.
> A top-class boat does not actually need to be rowed much;
> the skillful martial artist does not actually need to move his hand.
> A married woman who takes a lover need not actually make much of a fuss. (1.5)

Here Tiger Hill is commemorated for its ability to gain fame despite its size—comparing favorably to the skills of a woman imposing her sexual will. In another poem, a daughter compares herself to a thief escaping from a police station, using lies to achieve her freedom despite the watchful eyes of the "guards"; that is, her mother (1.20). Another describes two unmarried people as being "just like a school and a cooperage facing each other / Students read books on one side, and coopers bind barrels on another" (3.69A). This poem has been interpreted as a lament about the shared loneliness of an unmarried pair of young people (Ōki 2011, 16). Yet it might also be read as an observation about geographical space and its class features: the working classes of Suzhou labor in spaces directly adjacent to those occupied by the elite but remain permanently separated from them.

The poems also contain some reflection of the constraints on young lovers who live in conditions of poverty, as in "My Mother's Cough":

> My secret lover came in the window,
> But my mother's cough scared him off.
> A dilapidated shack cannot become a Buddhist temple
> We are as separate as the two hair buns on the head of the Virgin Immortal He Xiangu. (1.19)

Living in a shack so small (or with walls so thin) that a cough could startle a lover climbing in the window, the singer of this poem laments the impoverishments of a built environment that, like her romance, will never achieve the solidity or transcendence of a Buddhist temple. In this poem and in others, gates, windows and doorways are figured not as sites of public commemoration but as liminal spaces where unorthodox feelings can be expressed. In "Resuming Relations," a couple closes the door on their bedchamber as a means of assuaging their anger, allowing the "traffic" of their feelings to resume like "a newly retiled road" (3.79). In "No Lover," a girl stands beside a window gazing at a lone wild goose outside, expressing bitterness at her solitude "like a pig's head stuffed with bitter herbs, like an abandoned Buddhist temple door without a corridor [behind it]" (1.8). In these poems, spaces both liturgical and utilitarian are presented instead as tools for expressing *qing*—not only feelings of romantic love but also sentiments that challenge social hierarchies and conventions. The *Mountain Songs* evoke anger, bitterness, solitude, and reconciliation using metaphors that are striking in their simplicity and directness.

I submit that Feng's act of transmitting these poems is politically significant, beyond the obvious contribution of introducing non-elite perspectives into conversations that largely operated to exclude them. Textual transmission positions these poems within the central stream of influence meant to contribute to the emotional and, by extension, ethical regulation of a much wider audience—the promise of their unvarnished *qing*. But these sentiments and experiences do not simply mimic elite mainstream views of the world as it is supposed to be. Feng (1993b, 3–4) notes this contribution in the last few lines of his preface:

> People nowadays perhaps think that high antiquity, as laid out by historians, was one thing, and what circulates among the common people today is another. It may be that these are all just many ways of discussing the world (*lunshi* 論世). As for using the true *qing* of men and women as a means of exposing the false medicine of orthodoxy, the merit [of the mountain songs] is equal to "Hanging Branch" and other songs. So I recorded the lyrics to "Hanging Branch," and then to the mountain songs.

Feng once again alludes to time-honored practices of transmission: the records of high antiquity against which most elites seek to orient their moral self-cultivation are here positioned alongside "what circulates among the common people." But arguably these records are supplanted by the divergent experiences, landscapes, and emotional expressions offered by the commoners, who are here portrayed as providing compelling material for "discussing the world" and having knowledge of it. This material is constituted by

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their *qing*, whose "instability" many late Ming elites recognized as an inextricable part of moral well-being but tried to contain within the terms of an existing Confucian discourse—particularly the "nature" (*xing* 性) that Zhu Xi and other neo-Confucians identified with tranquility and moral order (Huang 2001, 50). In contrast, Feng suggests that far from being containable by existing Confucian moral prescriptions, *qing* in fact "exposes" this "orthodoxy" (*mingjiao* 名教) as "false medicine."

Significantly, in this preface, as well as his interlinear commentary, Feng attributes this accomplishment to the songs themselves, not to his work recording them. Transmitting this material situates it alongside elite modes of writing and further provincializes its content; yet transmission itself is a mode that amplifies, rather than displaces, what the songs were already doing. It is not an act that intends to translate or revise, but simply to forestall the likely oblivion of these self-sustaining, powerful moral statements. True to form, Feng goes on to show how the mountain songs offer a further interrogation even of the nature and site of transmission itself.

The Precarity and Power of Transmission

Transmission and concerns about its failure were key topics of conversation among Feng's contemporaries, most prominently among Feng's fellow devotees of vernacular literature. The very particularity of such vernacular speech led to worries about the extent to which quality—and not only timeliness—should play a role in the assessment of literature and its potential for transmission. Li Zhi (2009a, 324), for example, resolves these tensions by claiming that only good literature will endure through time:

> The quality of literary writing (*wenzhang* 文章) rises and falls with the times. This rising and falling is what is called "weighing up." Once this weighing up has been settled for one period of time, its brightness flows down to later eras. Surely this is not random! For through the ages, standards have been the same; thus, through the ages, literature has been the same. What is not the same is simply the conventions of a given period.

Here Li argues that the assessment of such quality "rises and falls with the times" but insists that assessments of quality will "flow down to later eras." The quality of literature, although it requires "weighing up" in each era, would nevertheless be self-evident and enduring. On this view, transmission was not so much an act of passing forward or documentation but an automatic process of discovery. The innate brilliance of a worthy literary work will ensure its transmission through time.

Li's optimism fails to consider how much the transmission of a literary work depends on the resources and prestige of an author, rather than merely on its self-evident aesthetic qualities. Feng's preface and commentaries to the *Mountain Songs* present transmission differently, as enmeshed in a precarious act of co-dependence and resonance that relies crucially on the particularities of its time and place, rather than the self-evidence of its literary quality. As Feng notes, the *Mountain Songs* mirror the *Odes* in just how narrowly they avoided historical oblivion—and Feng mirrors Confucius in just how judiciously his act of transmission averted that loss. His comparison suggests further that their oral circulation, in heterogeneous and always changing forms at the margins of society that reflect the everyday concerns of their singers, is evidence of their precarity but not their ephemerality. That the mountain songs nearly escape notice is a result of a historic, systematic classification of non-elite poetic composition as being unworthy of the category of literature.

Feng's approach expands on views like that of his contemporary Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610), who argued that talent alone was insufficient to ensure that the sublimity of a literary work would be recognized (Yuan 1990b, 11). Like Feng, Yuan (1935, 32–33; 1990b) was concerned to show that "the times"—the historical circumstances and contingencies of any given era, including its colloquial language—played an important role in securing the emotional response of any given audience to a work of literature. But Feng goes further to specify that it is social hierarchies, not only a vague historical context, which prevent the transmission of work by non-elites and foreclose the possibility of its moral service. Feng's preface indicates that these mountain songs, excluded as they are from elite consideration, are thus also excluded from the resources and prestige—in other words, from the hierarchies of power—that secure the perpetuity of other forms of (in his view, less worthy) literary expression. When Feng's preface narrates the history of separation between elite literati literature and the songs of laborers and commoners, he identifies these vast inequalities of power.

The mountain songs, like many of those included in the *Shijing*, were endangered because they emerged from an unlettered vernacular culture, prevented not only by its inherent orality but also its "vulgarity" (*su* 俗) from entering the transmitted textual record. Late Ming aesthetic tastes associated vulgarity with a certain unwholesomeness of content, which the sexual themes of the *Mountain Songs* certainly exemplified. But as James Cahill (1978, 191) pointed out, vulgarity was also associated by elites with a portrayal of lower-class life, "which could suggest uncomfortably that the poor were not really so contented and picturesque as they preferred to believe." The stigma of vulgarity directly influenced transmission, because elites did not consider paintings or literary works that considered such subjects to be worthy of inclusion in personal art collections or libraries.[11] In painting, only one example thematizing lower-class subjects from the late imperial period remains extant: the "virtually unprecedented" depiction of beggars and street people (*liu min* 流民) by Feng's fellow Suzhou native, Zhou Chen 周臣 (c. 1455–1536; see Bianchi 2017, 248).

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Poems were more likely than paintings to deviate from standard sentimentalized tropes in depicting the privation and hardship of non-elites, but rarely do these tribulations appear in commoners' own words. When oral poetry does present these voices, they strike much closer to the centers of literary orthodoxy than could other forms of vernacular literature, such as dramas, novels, or jokebooks. In terms of genre, prominence, and depth of genealogy, poetry's continuity with an existing Chinese literary heritage made the mountain songs' focus on unwelcome, vulgar subjects —not only sexual desire but also the disappointments, sorrow, and anxieties of underclass life—both particularly prominent and especially uncomfortable. Feng acknowledges this reality when he reads transmission as a process that demands the mobilization of specific economic and social resources, rather than an inevitable outcome accruing to works that bear universal markers of inherent quality. It is thus always tied to its time and place because it cannot be automatically linked to a chain of inheritance or be sustained spontaneously by virtue of some self-evident quality.

These themes find expression in the mountain songs themselves, particularly in those poems that elegize female body experience, including the sensations of orgasm, menstruation, and pregnancy. A series of seven poems on "pregnancy" that conclude Section 1 introduces the anxieties of women grappling with the possibility of pregnancy resulting from an extramarital affair, as well as the unwanted physiological changes brought about by a growing baby. This series of poems are remarkable for their female point of view, exploring the physiological experience of pregnancy and the diversity of emotions that may accompany it: fear, anxiety, hope, and sorrow. But the poems also present women's experiences as allegories of the precarity and risk of transmission: things are left behind under circumstances that do not bode well for their fate.

In one poem in this series, a mother-to-be meditates on the ugliness of the written character for pregnancy, *yun* 孕:

> A stroke [to my belly] on every visit [by my lover],
> Slowly my clothes tighten on my waist.
> Except that the character "pregnant" 孕 looks ugly in writing:
> The "child" 子 inside is big and the "breast" 奶 is too high. (1.32a)

The poem uses an observation about two components of the character for pregnancy, *yun* 孕—comprising the characters for "child" (*zi* 子) below and "breast" (*nai* 奶) above—to suggest that writing something down fails to match the lived experience it is meant to convey. Alternatively, the poem indicates the physical burden of pregnancy in bearing the overlarge child beneath a swelling chest. Both readings warn of different sacrifices made in the act of transmission: in one, committing experience to writing formally records its reality but can only gesture toward its felt experience; in the other, bearing the weight of posterity exerts a physical cost. Another poem in the series grapples with the sorrow of having to give up a child, that which "flows forth (*fengliu* 風流), transmitted (*chuan* 傳) by a secret lover" (1.32e). Here the baby is described in terms often used to explain the transmission of literary influences, which flow like water from one generation to another. But unfortunately, the mother has "no husband to rely on" and so must drown her baby in a lotus pond. This poem speaks of the precarity of transmission when its sentiments—however authentic—do not find adequate sustenance in the social or economic conditions of their time.

Like the "ballads of farmers" Feng mentions in his preface, both poems suggest that transmission—of life, of texts, or of experience—is less about the quality of what is transmitted or even human desire for it, and more about the circumstances under which that content might be sustained. These poems sung from a female point of view, moreover, lead us to consider the additional difficulty of conveying female perspectives and experiences. They elegize experiences of women whose own stories of transmission—of quite literally birthing posterity—are jagged, uncertain, and beset by sometimes insurmountable burdens. Their children, like their literary creations, exist outside the socially supported institutions of patrilineage and have little hope of survival.

Feng seems to offer some hope, however, in his comments on the poem immediately following the "pregnancy" series. Titled "Not Pregnant," this poem records the lament of parents in a secret love affair who cannot conceive (whether with each other or with their respective spouses is not clear). The couple declare that their "secret love can exceed the breadth of the skies" but worry that they "have no son or daughter to burn incense for us after our death… , We have hugely wasted [these] two or three years" (1.33). In his comment on the poem, however, Feng restates their dilemma: "'We have hugely wasted these two or three years'—but then you have no scars to turn into someone else's gossip [lit., scars that would goad transmission (*chuan* 傳) of the news by others]. In this world, you must not fear truncating the flow of the 'seeds of love.' Do you really need sons or daughters to burn incense for you?" (1.33). Feng here picks up on the analogy between the transmission of bodily fluids in human conception and the transmission of literary production, using the same imagery that in the preceding poems described pregnancies as "flowing forth" (*fengliu* 風流) from love affairs.

Feng's comment can be read in multiple ways. He contemplates the idea that transmission is not always something undertaken by one's literal progeny, and we must beware of those who would transmit gossip about our socially subversive actions. But he also may be asking

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who it is that "burns incense for us": Is it the traditional lineages of scholarship—the conventional "sons and daughters"—who take forward our works into the future? Or is it those who, like Feng, stand outside conventional lines of transmission? What endures is the emotive thrust of these experiences, their *qing*, whose authenticity encourages Feng to write down these songs and their perspectives.

This view is directly articulated in Feng's well-known short story collection *History of* Qing (*Qingshi*), where his introductory remarks present transmission (here understood as the recording of experiences with *qing*) as a transformative act (1993a, 4–5):

> I wish to choose the most sublime of those experiences with *qing* from past and present, and write a small record (*chuan* 傳) of each, so that people will know that *qing* can endure. In this way, a lack of *qing* will be transformed into having *qing*; and private *qing* will be transformed into public concern. Commoners, villages, states, and all-under-Heaven will all use *qing* to deal peaceably with each other, and frivolous customs will have hope for change.

Feng argues that the transmission of stories of *qing* will do nothing less than change the world. Once "recorded" (*chuan*, lit., "transmitted"), they will stand as monuments to the enduring capacities of *qing*, which would go unnoticed were it not for the leverage that the act of transmission creates. In such acts, orthodox lineages of blood or text are supplanted by connections based on *qing*.

Feng's comments, although they make bold claims for the capacity of *qing*, both rely on and subtly redirect typical expectations for textual transmission, which involve what and whose literary productions should be transmitted. These questions gained added poignancy during periods of perceived cultural crisis, the most salient of which were displacements of Han Chinese dynastic rule by so-called barbarian outsiders, such as the Mongol rulers of the Yuan dynasty or the Manchu rulers of the Qing. During such times, Han Chinese literati worked to preserve a literary record that in their view represented nothing less than Chinese civilization itself (Franke 1982, 180; Langlois 1980). Perhaps not surprisingly, what they preserved typically represented a very narrow Confucian vision of Chinese civilization, often defined in terms of cultural and racial purity and excluding even long-standing Chinese Buddhist and Daoist influences on literary production. These repeated efforts at literary retrenchment often targeted the *Odes* themselves, smoothing out their heterogeneity by removing the "contamination" of "barbarian" and "licentious" influences on their production (Mittag 1993, 209).

Like these more typical practices of transmission, Feng's mode of transmission shores up the voices and literature made precarious by historical and political circumstances of unknown duration. Yet, it profoundly disrupts the chauvinistic practices that marked these other parts of the mainstream textual tradition. The ideals of transmission that emerge in Feng's poems suggest an orientation not toward the past but toward the future—which is inherently full of risk. The pregnant singers of the mountain songs and the largely female voices who sing other songs in the collection assume neither a fluency with an established past nor a secure means of having their voices heard. They speak directly to their lived experiences and emotions in the present, using as metaphors objects and situations not prevalent in much literati poetry. When Feng enters these songs into the permanent textual record, he hoped to record their *qing* for posterity. But his act of transmission bequeathed material whose content was both multivocal and indeterminate—to orient, inspire, or transform the worlds of distant strangers, even in times of catastrophic loss and subjugation.

Conclusion

Transmission, as Feng presents it, is a political action that is more generative than representational: it does not make claims about identity so much as it positions precarious voices as the heritage of the future. By transmitting Suzhou's urban folksongs, Feng did not speak for or about the urban laborers who composed them. Rather, his act of transmission made it possible for them to speak in their own voices, supplanting typical contributions to the elite textual tradition. Our own context, equally beset by political uncertainty and the dominance of elite male perspectives, offers further examples of the political-theoretical possibilities at stakes in transmission. By way of conclusion, I gesture toward one such example from the voices of those who—like the pregnant singers of the mountain songs—likewise face erasure because of their condition.

At the Little Rock Family Planning Services clinic, before the 2022 Dobbs decision triggered a total abortion ban in Arkansas, women and girls seeking medical terminations of pregnancy could record their stories in a shared journal in the waiting room (Kirchgaessner 2024). The accounts document the abuse and uncertainty motivating their choices, but many also speak words of encouragement to others in the same situation: "I'm doing this for numerous reasons, but your reason is just as important!" writes one account. In addition to their political significance as historical relics or as data marking the lived costs of restricting abortion access, these accounts model moral practice for future women and girls, whose situations are not only precarious but are also increasingly imperiled in the political contexts of our own time and place. Transmitting these accounts—to and from other women, as well as to the readers of the international newspaper in which they eventually appeared—constitutes a meaningful political action, even when (*especially* when) there is little hope that the situation will soon change. As a forward-looking act of preservation, transmission can situate voices that would otherwise be obliterated or foreclosed within new histories of the future; that is, they can be sustained as

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exemplars of moral action through writing and so generate new insights about the scope and content of human living together associated with the domain of the political.

Such acts of transmission draw attention to the heterogeneity of their era or at least to those aspects of it that are most in tension with the mainstream reality of the times. In doing so, they invite critical reflection by future others on otherwise forgotten possibilities from otherwise marginalized perspectives. Transmission thus provides an alternative temporal framing to claims that the values and institutions of the present—including idioms of democracy, the state, or human rights— must feature in all political theorizing, including in reconstructions of "traditional" Confucian values (e.g., El Amine 2016, 108). When these values and institutions break down or fail to serve whole classes of people whose struggles are so marginalized they risk fading into obscurity, transmission can work to preserve their voices as the heritage of the future and create bulwarks against eroding prospects for hopeful social change.

Far from constructing a monument to the past, then, transmission offers a means by which we might provincialize the present as a source of meaningful value, so that the most precarious voices of our present moment constitute a (future) history for theory and action. We are encouraged to attend to the dynamic and contingent acts underlying the production of a shared critical discourse, rather than assuming the existence of some underlying, transhistorical tradition ("Confucian," "Christian," or otherwise) purportedly at work perpetuating social values. When precarious voices are transmitted, they offer a far more heterogeneous and differently situated source of reflective thinking (whether for early modern China or our own time and place), beyond the rarified philosophy reconstructed on the basis of a small set of elite thinkers. By drawing attention to the sometimes very small acts by which a history of reflective thought can be constituted and sustained, transmission does not forever preclude the co-opting of such thought. But its textual records fend off the erosion of voices and experiences, offering a mechanism by which disenfranchised voices from marginalized spaces can endure throughout the rise and fall of any particular formation of state power.

Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592725101886.

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Notes

1 By "foreclosure" I intend the strong meaning articulated by Jodi Dean (2005, 69), who writes of communication on the internet, "Anything I fail to encounter—or can't imagine encountering—isn't simply excluded (everything is already there); it is foreclosed."

2 For an examination of these debates up to and including the Ming, see Adam Schorr (1994, 17–46); for examination of early views, see J. J. Y. Liu (1966, 65–69).

3 Songs from chapter 5 of the *Mountain Songs* may have been taken from the courtesan quarters, and chapter 6 features imitations by literati. Chapter 10 includes songs from Tongcheng, Anhui, which are the only Mandarin songs in the collection (Ōki and Santangelo 2011, 24). Shi Rujie (2012, 86) suggests that the term "mountain song" was merely a conventional term for "folksong," having little to do with the relatively flat topography of the Jiangsu region. Töpelmann (1973) dates the publication of the collection to 1610 and Fu Chengzhou (1989, 60) to between 1611–14.

4 The Wu language would have been unintelligible to speakers of Mandarin (*guanhua*, the "official" dialect). McLaren and Zhang (2017, 20) use the term "Wu language grouping" to indicate the linguistic complexity and heterogeneity of the Wu region.

5 Hereafter, all poems from this edition will be cited by chapter and poem number. All translations from the Chinese are my own unless otherwise noted. See the online appendix for the original Chinese text and additional translations, including for poems cited in footnotes.

6 For discussion of the metaphor used in this poem, see Ōki and Santangelo (2011, 133 fn., 115).

7 "Shu" 述 and "chuan" 傳, both translated as "transmission" in English, were often defined in the Confucian commentarial tradition in terms of each other, typically as the antithesis of "creation" (*zuo* 作; Makeham 2003; Puett 2001). Huang Kan's influential sixth-century commentary on *Analects* 7.1, for example, explains that "as for 'transmit but not create,'

transmit (*shu* 述) means to pass on (*chuan* 傳) old works" (He and Huang 1985, 85).

8 As Bruce Rusk (2012, 73, 83) has shown, the kinds of verse that were categorized as *shi* 詩 poems changed over time. The late Ming harbored an unusually capacious definition, sometimes using "song" (*ge* 歌) as a category interchangeably with "poem" (*shi* 詩)—much the way Feng does here.

9 For discussion and evidence, see Guan (1987, 259–60) and Töpelmann (1973, 488–89). Wu Cuncun (2010, 314–19) offers the most comprehensive survey of this debate over the *Mountain Songs* contents, noting that the claim that the songs are literati imitations rather than genuine folksongs is more often implied than explicitly argued. She traces the claim to communist ideologists of the 1950s, who could not swallow the idea that the rural masses would express erotic sentiment. Wu's literary analysis concludes that the mountain songs contain themes and expressions of female desire that were "simply never made available in literati writing" (326).

10 References to textile production in the *Mountain Songs* are too numerous to list here. One example explicitly linked to geography is the poem "Bedspread and Mat" (4.93), which finds two lovers cavorting amid the silk damask bedspreads made in Songjiang 松江, near Suzhou (now part of Shanghai), and the white bed mats made on Shantang 山塘 Road, leading to Tiger Hill. (For information on these geographic references, see Ōki and Santangelo [2011, 172 fns. 5–6]; for a translation of the poem see the appendix.)

11 In contrast, it may have been "antisexual religious censorship in the West" that prevented the transmission in print of erotic folksongs in European languages, despite their prevalence in folklore traditions as a whole (Legman 1990, 417).

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