As a human inclination to cross the culturally demarcated gender-division, transgender in Chinese culture also finds expression in the phenomenon of androgyny, where a subject’s recalcitrant impulses against cultural imperatives prompt him/her to move back and forth across the gender-division with great freedom, thus formulating an identity that encompasses both the masculine and feminine principles. In the literature of late imperial China, the phenomenon of androgyny is most prominent in scholar-beauty romances that flourished during the late Ming and early Qing period. Like actors and actresses in traditional Chinese theater, heroines in that genre often don male garments masquerading as men and moving freely between genders in the game of courtship. One most interesting case can be traced to the early Qing romance Renjian le (Happiness in the human world), which creates a caizi (talented scholar) and a jiaren (beauty), both endowed with androgynous inclinations.

The heroine of the fiction has two names: Zhuangzhu (a pearl on the palm) and Yinan (suitable to be a male), pertaining to the two parts of her gender identity. Having dressed in male clothes since her childhood, been educated with Confucian classics, and often accompanied by a “boy”—her maid in disguise—the girl deports perfectly like a man; and “his” dashing carriage beguiles numerous beauties to send over matchmakers to seek an ideal union. To avoid troubles, the family moves away and she has to occasionally return to her native
sexual role. Thereafter, “if anyone knows she is a ‘male,’ she will meet him as Yinan; if anyone knows she is a female, she will emerge as Zhuangzhu. Changing her gender like a chameleon, she puzzles everyone who meets her.”

Not only is androgyny inscribed in the jiaren’s name and bearing, but it also characterizes the mode of her courtship. Impressed by her poetry, Ruqi, a talented scholar, deeply admires “his” talents. The scholar is then invited to visit the beauty’s house where he is received by her, cross-dressed as a man. Yinan tells Ruqi that the poetry is, in fact, composed by “his” younger sister, and “he” happily serves as a matchmaker for Ruqi and “his sister,” who is—of course—one other than herself. Thereafter, Yinan switches back to her native feminine identity of Zhuangzhu; and the romance winds up with a happy union between the scholar and the beauty. The active role that the jiaren plays in courting the caizi indicates her adoption of a male mode of behavior in a culture where boudoir confinement is the norm, a heretic gender stand that is also projected in the male garment she puts on. Thus, she personifies the ideal of androgyny, which is defined by Cynthia Secor as “the capacity of a single person of either sex to embody the full range of human character traits, despite cultural attempts to render some exclusively feminine and some exclusively masculine.” And the psychological impetus for her gender deviation perfectly matches Carolyn Heilbrun’s perceptive observation that “androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate.”

The beauty’s androgynous drift is mirrored symmetrically in the scholar, a man with extraordinary beauty, as well as inscribed in his name and titles. The first part of his name, Ru, is made of two parts, meaning respectively “water” and “female,” whereas the second part qi usually refers to a vessel. If we ignore the normal meaning of ru as “you” in classical Chinese, by taking its ideographical connotations, then the name actually means “a female organ.” This feminine implication is reinforced by the two parts comprising his title, hu and lian, both bearing a jade radical, which often appears in Chinese women’s names, hence carrying unmistakable feminine import. More accurately, his gender identity is inscribed in a second title, Xiuhu (embroidery tiger), which he chooses after the late Ming literati celebrity Tang Bohu (1470–1523), his personal idol. Since needlework in imperial China was an exclusive female avocation and “tiger” is a conventional trope for masculinity, the title signals an incorporation of opposite gender attributes in his identity. Interestingly, just as Yinan’s gentlemanly bearing induces female attention, Ruqi’s feminine beauty courts male aggression. The son of