



Rethinking Authorship and Agency: Women and Gender in Late Imperial China

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It has been three decades since the 1992 publication of the pioneering special issue of *Late Imperial China* that focused on “Poetry and Women’s Culture in Late Imperial China.” Its four seminal articles were authored by social historians Susan Mann and Dorothy Ko and by literary scholars Maureen Robertson and Ellen Widmer. Mann and Ko marked the rediscovery and elucidation of the contents and shifts in women’s education in scholar-official families and the debates on the nature and suitability of women’s learning in the Ming and Qing. Robertson delved into women’s representations of their gendered subjectivities and their literary negotiations to articulate a voice of their own in a feminine poetics scripted by male poets, while Widmer recovered the literary legacy of writing women.¹ The volume presaged and encouraged an expanding trend of scholarship dedicated to research on women and gender in the literature, culture, and history of late imperial China. Many advances in scholarship have been accomplished in the intervening years, facilitated by the recovery and reproduction of Ming and Qing women’s compositions in poetry as well as in diverse genres such as drama, fiction, letters, biographies, diaries, and others, not to mention women’s engagements with visual cultures and their multifarious roles as subjects in legal, religious, and other genres of representation.

We conceived this special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* as a group project and convened twelve scholars who engage in research on women and gender in the Ming and Qing periods. It brings together new

research by three generations of scholars, beginning with vanguard scholar Ellen Widmer and finishing with doctoral candidate Yuefan Wang. While most of the twelve contributors are literary specialists, including drama and fiction scholar Guo Yingde, who coauthored the paper on drama with Guojun Wang, we are joined by legal historian Janet Theiss and art historian Lara C. W. Blanchard, whose approaches to their subjects are inflected by interdisciplinarity. This special issue aims to reflect the diversity and transdisciplinarity of recent research in this field, so we did not set specific themes and topics or specify theoretical approaches but left open and flexible parameters of disciplinary orientation, thematic concerns, conceptual and methodological approaches, and the genres and source materials examined. As we developed our individual contributions, and particularly after our special issue workshop held online in May 2022, we recognized that our articles cohered around the two concepts: authorship and agency. These concepts arose in different ways and to varying degrees from both the familiar and the new sources examined; we each necessarily revisited and rethought these concepts, situating them in new contexts.

When Roland Barthes published his provocative essay “The Death of the Author” and Michel Foucault released his “What Is an Author?” in the late 1960s, they set off the poststructuralist critique of the author as the originary, authoritative source for the meaning of his/her work. Feminist response was mixed. While freeing the text from essentialist interpretations, Nancy Miller asserted, “The removal of the Author has not so much made room for a revision of the concept of authorship as it has . . . repressed and inhibited discussion of any writing identity. . . . then it matters not *who* writes.” Miller further argued that “the postmodernist decision that the Author is dead, and subjective agency along with him, does not necessarily work for women and prematurely forecloses the question of identity for them.”² By the 1990s premodern women writers and their works were rediscovered collectively, opening up an accommodating critical space in Chinese studies in the Western academy. This space was reinforced by feminist historian Joan Scott’s advocacy of gender as a category of historical analysis and cultural critic Judith Butler’s productive concept of gender performativity.³ In her concluding remarks to the edited volume *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing*, Maureen Robertson raised the issue of women’s “literary authorship” in premodern China. To characterize how Ming and Qing women’s writings were becoming visible in the landscape of the dominant culture in late imperial China, she borrowed the term *minor literature* from Gilles Deleuze. For Robertson, “‘minority’ is ultimately a site for realizing the potential of historical change.”⁴ Ming and Qing *guixiu*, the cultivated women of the inner chambers, have inhabited that site and realized

historical change. It is our task as literary historians to excavate and learn from the artifacts of their experience that they left in that site.

Contributors in this special issue work with the textual strategies of authors (including poets, dramatists, compilers, and editors) both male and female. Several, such as Lara C. W. Blanchard, Maram Epstein, Grace S. Fong, and Guojun Wang and Guo Yingde, directly address issues of authorship in the texts they analyze. Subjective agency is demonstrated by the historical authors and fictional characters studied. Scholarly studies no longer endeavor just to recover women's agency; they also seek to examine the agency of their male counterparts, the literati scholars. The exhibition of agency varies across genres and in degree, with some cases more visible than others, for example, the adolescent poet Xu Zhaohua 徐昭華 (17th and 18th cent.) in Widmer's contribution; Shang Jinglan 商景蘭 (1605–1676), whose agency transformed after the Manchu conquest, as shown in her subject positions inscribed in her "garden poetry" incisively analyzed in Yuefan Wang's article; the women poets and painters studied in the articles of Binbin Yang, Janet Theiss, and Grace S. Fong; the filial sons seeking to commemorate their mother's virtues and sacrifices in Martin Huang's article; the compilers of two very different anthologies in the studies by Jessica Dvorak Moyer and Lara C. W. Blanchard; and the male editor of a magazine and a scholar-educator of women students in the Republican period in Xiaorong Li's article. Not least, in the fictional genres of *tanci* and drama, agency is embodied by the fictional characters the authors create, for example, the fictional heroine Meng Lijun 孟麗君 in *Zaisheng yuan* 再生緣 (Karmic Bonds of Reincarnation) in Epstein's article and the concubine character in plays dramatizing the historical incident of cannibalism in the siege of Suiyang in the Tang, as re-created by playwrights through the Ming and Qing to the Republican period, in Wang and Guo's article.

***Guixiu*: Changes through Time and Space**

We have grouped the contributions under three thematic titles to enhance other linkages among them. The *guixiu*, the cultivated gentlewomen of the inner chambers, are the central figures informing the first group of articles, especially their identity and formation in relation to poetic culture. The studies of Widmer and Li examine the agency of male scholars in relation to women and vice versa through advocacy and mutual inspiration. Their case studies are situated at opposite temporal moments: the emergence of the enduring mentor-protégé model during the period of the Ming-Qing transition and male support in the professionalization and cultural production of the last generation of *guixiu* in the afterglow during the late Qing/early Republican era.

While previous studies of the phenomenon of male mentor–female disciple have focused on prominent models in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as the literary coterie of women poets under the auspices of Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1797) in Nanjing and Chen Wenshu 陳文述 (1771–1843) in Hangzhou, Widmer, in “Beyond the Inner Chambers: Xu Zhaohua and Her Teacher Mao Qiling,” uncovers an unusual and mostly forgotten early model in Mao Qiling 毛奇齡 (1623–1716), a leading scholar of the early Qing who was a lifelong mentor of several *guixiu* in Shaoxing and Hangzhou. Widmer introduces Mao’s sympathetic memoirs of talented gentry women whom he befriended and whose poetic endeavors he nourished. Particularly illuminating is his account of his star student, Xu Zhaohua, an adolescent daughter of one of his friends. Xu’s strong motivation to study Mao’s poetic style resulted in sustained long-distance epistolary learning beyond the inner chambers. When doubt was cast on her accomplished verse, Xu was insistent on proving its authenticity. Widmer thereby demonstrates that the recognition of authorship mattered to *guixiu*.

Between the two exemplary studies marking the rise of *guixiu* culture and its twilight, Yuefan Wang and Binbin Yang situate individual and collectives of women authors in significant places and within regional and transregional networks. In “Garden, Gender, and Memory: Shang Jinglan and Her Writings in the Ming-Qing Transition,” Yuefan Wang uncovers the important role of the Allegory Garden (Yuyuan 寓園) in Shang’s literary writing and social interactions. Wang notes that although the garden was at the center of Shang’s conjugal life, before the suicide of her husband, Qi Biaoqia 祁彪佳 (1602–1645), Shang did not explicitly denote the garden in her poems, nor did Qi mention Shang in his garden writings. After the dynastic change, the garden became a prominent trope by which Shang memorialized her late husband and lamented the political turmoil. Now head of the Qi household, Shang not only managed the garden but also used the garden theme to educate her daughters and daughters-in-law on poetic composition. Meanwhile, male and female scholars in early Qing China visited the garden and contributed literary pieces that helped transform the garden from a couple’s private place into a cultural site open to the public. Wang’s study demonstrates that the garden, embedded in familial and political changes, engendered Shang’s activities as an author and afforded her agency as a gentlewoman in early Qing literati circles.

Rather than focusing on a single individual, Binbin Yang considers a group of geographically connected women authors in “Yangzhou Revisited: Spatial Imaginaries and Women’s Literature during the Qing.” Countering the popular assumption that Yangzhou lacked female writers, Yang’s article not only uncovers the vibrancy of women’s literary activities in Yangzhou but also places

Yangzhou at the center of transregional literary connections. As Yang suggests, Yangzhou was a favored destination for sojourners, especially those from Huizhou and even from Guangdong. Furthermore, the geographical advantage of Yangzhou nourished spatial imaginaries about the country and the world in women's literature of the Qing era. The study dislocates women authors from ideas of homeland or fixed-place identities and brings out women's agency in mobility and spatial imagination from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

If the previous three contributions, to varying degrees, touch on the education of *guixiu* and their literary production in the context of late imperial China, Xiaorong Li's article, "Where Have All the *Guixiu* Gone? Chinese 'Women of Talent' at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," explores the resilience of the *guixiu* tradition during China's transition to the modern era. One of the cases investigated in Li's article involves Gu Xianrong 顧憲融 (1901–1955) and his female disciples who studied classical Chinese poetry with him in modern women's schools and whose poetry was collectively published thanks to Gu's sponsorship and that of his male friends. The mentor-protégé model here recalls that between Yuan Mei and his female disciples, as well as the earlier case of Mao Qiling and Xu Zhaohua discussed in Widmer's study. The other example discussed by Li focuses on women's writings published in *Xiangyan zazhi* 香艷雜誌 (Xiangyan Magazine, 1914–1916). Although adopting classical language and tropes, these poems frequently address social events and concerns in modern China and the world. In this article, Li defines *guixiu* as a literary or authorly identity. *Guixiu* authors, well versed in classical diction, were simultaneously equipped with the "agency" to embrace modern media and social changes. Yet, here we still witness the convention of male cultural leaders acting on behalf of *guixiu* in preserving female writing.

Transcendence and Transgression

The second group of contributions focus on gendered voices in literary writing. In the cases discussed here, the women authors work within the existing literati writing tradition, insert their own voices, and occasionally challenge or even subvert the conventions associated with it. Janet Theiss examines the life and writings of Wang Liang 汪亮 (ca. 1720–1790), a poet, painter, and player of the zither and the game of Go. Theiss's study, "She Whistles Freely Shunning Companions': The Embedded and Transcendent Selves of Poet-Painter Wang Liang in the Eighteenth Century," shows that, while Wang was entangled in a public sex and corruption scandal of her family, circumstances compelled her to evade conventional womanly duties and seek space in art and literature to transcend worldly fetters. Through close reading of a poetic conversation between Wang and a male scholar revolving around the game of Go, Theiss uncovers the

nuanced dynamics of gaming and the multilayered relationship between Wang and the elderly scholar. Theiss uses the concept of cultural androgyny to shed light on Wang's cultural practices, specifically, androgyny not as a fusion of male and female identities but as the agility with which she navigated between gendered social roles and transcendence achieved through writing. Questioning the static gender binary, Theiss's study of Wang's authorship complicates the concepts of male writing or female writing and proposes cultural androgyny in art and literature as one mode of social engagement. Authorship throws into relief multiple dimensions of Wang's identity, revealing her agency as an unconventional lady in a family and as a versatile participant in gendered cultural interactions.

Women's agency as a capacity to negotiate subjection and subjectivity is best reflected in Grace S. Fong's contribution, "From Convention to Subversion: Case Studies on the Female Gaze in Premodern China." Fong identifies a shared tendency in Chinese and Western ekphrastic writings to align the literary subject with the masculine and visual representation with the feminine. A painting genre, the portrait of a beauty (*meiren hua* 美人畫), was primarily produced for the male gaze. Women's poetic commentaries on paintings of beauties, therefore, problematize the objectification of women. As Fong's case studies reveal, some female authors in late imperial China wrote about conventional modes of representation, especially a single female beauty set against one scene. In other contexts, women authors' ekphrastic writings highlight female homosociality, both as painters/authors and in the portrayed characters, which defies objectification. The last two cases, respectively featuring Gan Lirou 甘立嫫 (1743–1819) and Chen Yunlian 陳蘊蓮 (ca. 1800–after 1860), demonstrate increasing autobiographical sensibility. While some of Gan's late poems deliberately probe female desire and erotica, thus countering the male gaze, Chen's ekphrastic inscriptions on her autobiographical self-portraits provide a rare case of female introspection and criticism of her husband. In these case studies, women authors (in painting and writing) eschew objectification ingrained in the male gaze to assume fluid gender roles in painting and writing.

In "Zaisheng yuan and the Writing of Women's Culture," Maram Epstein examines elite women's negotiation and transgression of gendered Confucian orthodoxy through a study of the *tanci* novel *Zaisheng yuan* written by Chen Duansheng 陳端生 (1751–1796) and widely read by elite cloistered women. Mapping out the "affective world/archive" of *Zaisheng yuan*, Epstein outlines the major modes of narratives through which the author resisted patriarchal norms, including rejecting the scholar-beauty ideals, replacing romantic *qing* 情 with women's intent (*zhi* 志), rewriting the symbolic order between private

and public, and rewriting chaste martyrdom into male fidelity and suicide. Thus depicted, the female characters in the novel actively voice their frustrations as well as fantasies, pleasures, and values. Furthermore, Epstein brings our attention to the notes and commentaries in the novel and identifies its female author and consumers as a counterpublic with latent yearnings and desires for agency. Epstein's case study of *tanci*, commonly regarded as a women's genre, entails reconsideration of the relationship between gender and genre—whether we can speak of female agency inherent in a female generic tradition.

Negotiating Virtues

The last group of contributions center on authorship and womanly virtues. The first two address a single anthology compiled primarily by one person. In these cases, womanly virtue serves as an important factor in the selection and organization of materials. Jessica Dvorak Moyer's article, "Agency and Strategy: Chastity Exemplars in an Early Qing Anthology," examines the narratives about chaste ladies in *Neize yanyi* 內則演義 (Expanded Meaning of the "Inner Standards," 1656), commissioned by the Shunzhi emperor at the request of his mother and compiled by the Han Chinese scholar-official Fu Yijian 傅以漸 (1609–1665). As Moyer explains, working in the wake of the Qing conquest and in the established *lienü* 烈女 (chaste ladies) tradition, Fu placed equal emphasis on those women's virtues and their intelligence and agency. In the collection of chaste-lady stories, Fu intentionally included non-Chinese women from dynasties ruled by non-Han peoples. The context of the Manchu court, especially the intended audience of Manchu and Mongolian imperial women, contributed to a marked flexibility in Fu's depictions of virtuous women. In this case study, Fu's strategic representations of female virtue and agency allowed him to navigate the complicated ethnic dynamics of the Ming-Qing transition.

Womanly virtue also lies at the center of a female scholar's editing project, as demonstrated in Lara C. W. Blanchard's article, "Virtue and Women's Authorship in Chinese Art History: A Study of *Yutai huashi* (History of Painting from Jade Terrace)." The woman artist and scholar Tang Shuyu 湯漱玉 (1801–1829), with assistance from her husband, produced a comprehensive record on women painters in premodern China. In this instance, a few features distinguish female from male authorship. First, Tang's authorship is hidden behind her editing practice. Tang selected and organized most of the contents in the anthology from existing sources, in which process she refrained from revealing a strong editorial voice except in the short section "Bielu" 別錄 (Separate Records) at the end. The obscured female authorship parallels women's modesty and general invisibility in public. Second, womanly virtues serve as an important organizing principle for the collection of stories. Tang not only ordered the

female painters based on their social status, hence indicating their virtue, but also portrayed herself as a virtuous wife in deference to her husband. By deferring to male authorities, including her husband, Tang subordinated her authorship to the Confucian orthodoxy regarding women's gendered roles.

Moving beyond chastity or wifely virtues, Martin Huang addresses a particular type of virtue narratives in "A Son's Obligations: Promoting and Circulating Motherly Exemplariness in Late Imperial China." Huang identifies shifting views on the practice of memorialization — in this case sons writing biographies for their own mothers from the sixteenth century on. These sons promoted their mothers' virtues by focusing on their sufferings and sacrifices, describing bodily intimacy between mothers and children, and recounting their activities occasionally transgressing the female realm. Here, female agency—the capacity to take action—appears in variegated modes. In some cases, the male authors had to navigate between conflicting roles as a son and a Confucian scholar, especially when a son's mother was not his father's main wife. Lastly, the writing of womanly virtues served as a mode of literati socializing. Some filial sons cultivated a network of literati scholars by soliciting and publishing writings on their mothers by renowned contemporary scholars. Similar to the case of Fu Yijian, writing about women's virtues and women's agency allowed the male authors to shape their own cultural identities.

Finally, in "Gender and Violence: The Multivalent Voices of a Cannibalized Concubine in Late Imperial Chinese Literature," Guojun Wang and Guo Yingde take up an extreme case of women's sacrifice by examining the concubine character in a series of literary works derived from the story about the Tang-dynasty general Zhang Xun 張巡 (709–757 CE) and his cannibalized concubine. Historical writings record and celebrate Zhang killing his concubine and offering her body as food to his army during the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763). In contrast to the emphasis on Zhang's loyalty and sacrifice, a group of drama scripts and performances starting from the early Ming dynasty rescued the concubine character from oblivion and imbued her with multivalent types of agency—as a concubine, a knight-errant, a loyal subject of the state, and a goddess. This study examines the relationships among multiple types of authorship: literati authorship of *chuanqi* dramas, collective authorship of folk opera, and male actors performing (authoring) female characters onstage. The study demonstrates that, as folk opera shifted further away from the literati writing tradition, the concubine character in those works exhibits increasing agency in contention with the husband character. Here we witness competing agencies not only between the male and female characters but also between individual authors and groups of theater practitioners (including performers and audiences).

Genres, audiences, and various factors in shifting historical contexts together conditioned the relationship between authorship and agency.

The studies in this special issue offer new insights into authorship and agency of both women and men in late imperial China. They range widely in time from the Ming-Qing transition to the early twentieth century and explore writings in many different genres and forms. They show the diversity of cultural responses and alternative strategies negotiated by both men and women to the pervasive gender order in late imperial China. These articles have revisited critical issues and opened up new perspectives that we hope will inspire further reflection and examination.



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Notes

1. Furth, "Poetry and Women's Culture."
2. Miller, "Changing the Subject," 104, 106.
3. Scott, "Gender"; Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
4. Robertson, "Literary Authorship," 382.

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