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Women in Chinese Learned Culture: Complexities, Exclusivities and Connecting Narratives

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Introduction – writing about women in Chinese learned culture: complexities and ambiguities

One of the more common stereotypes about women in Chinese history is that they were ‘victims’ of tradition, or Confucian patriarchy. The problem with such labelling is that it denies the complexity of the ideological and cultural forces that shaped learned culture in China and women's place therein at various points in time. To be sure, the official Chinese historical record itself does not proffer much textual evidence about women except, as the dynastic histories indicate, their role as trouble-makers:

'seductive or menacing figures who usurp power from legitimate male rulers or corrupt vulnerable young emperors'.¹ Moreover, it seems evident that from earliest times, according to both archaeological and inscriptional data, the political and economic status of most women in Neolithic and Shang China (c. 1600–1045 BCE), as represented in burial practices and religious testimonies, was inferior to that of most men.² Nevertheless, such documentation does not seal the historical fate of women's access to the Chinese learned world. The historical record indicates a much more complex and ambiguous situation.

It should be noted that *both* men and women had restricted access to the principal written medium, *wenyan*, also known as 'classical Chinese', which emerged around the fourth and third centuries BCE.³ Only those individuals who could read and write in this difficult language had a way into the learned world. Classical Chinese is extremely concise and compact – the language makes extensive use of literary and cultural allusions which often only an educated person might comprehend. It is impossible to say exactly what percentage of the Chinese population was literate at this time. But given the difficulties of recording on the earliest writing materials of bamboo and silk, it is safe to say that until the invention of paper sometime around the first century of the Common Era, very few men and even fewer women could read and write.⁴

Thus, learned culture in the early imperial era concerned a small minority of men and women. Among these literate and erudite women were aristocratic ladies at court, including imperial consorts and empress dowagers, who became well-known for their patronage of scholarship and literature.⁵ Examples of women embracing learned culture during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) were Empress Dou (d. 135 BCE), a proponent of Daoist ideas, and Empress Dowager Liang (d. 150 CE). The latter was recognised for her support of those women who contributed to scholarship on the Confucian Classics, including the *Book of History* (*Shangshu*) and the *Record of Ritual* (*Liji*). Unfortunately, the bulk of the written works produced by Han dynasty women has not survived except for a few poems.⁶

One of the best-known women belonging to this tiny literati elite was the female scholar Ban Zhao (c. 48–c. 118 CE) who was a member of a prominent family.⁷ She was an accomplished historian, contributing to the compilation of the *Hanshu* (Books of the Han), the second of the official dynastic histories. As the daughter of an important official, Ban Biao, and the sister of another, Ban Gu (both of whom were involved in the *Hanshu* project), Ban Zhao had entrée to the imperial court where she gained fame as a tutor to the attending ladies of the Inner Palace. When her brother suddenly died, she took over the composition of several sections of the *Hanshu*.⁸ Another accomplishment of Ban Zhao was her annotations to Liu Xiang's (77–6 BCE) *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü zhuan*), consisting of 125 life stories that were categorised in accordance with respectable conduct and personality.⁹ She also composed a well-known moral tract for women, *Nüjie* (Precepts for My Daughters) which was full of quotations from Confucius and the Classics; it offered advice to young brides from elite families on how to behave toward their husbands and in-laws.¹⁰

Over the centuries, this particular text by Ban Zhao, which in effect did pay attention to the education of women, came to be interpreted 'as an injunction to demure and submissive conduct,' and a tool for propagating self-sacrificing patrilineal values and thus oppressing women.¹¹ As the modern Han specialist Bret Hinsch advises, *Nüjie* should be understood as a guide to living what was then considered 'the good life', a primer of moral values for those persons seeking admiration and prestige. It would seem Liu Xiang's *Biographies of Exemplary Women* met a similar fate. Even though Liu's

compilation offered many portraits highlighting female wisdom, prescience and women's capacity for educating the young, later readings of the same text tended to emphasise those sections where the qualities of chastity, filiality and motherhood were central.¹² Moreover, beginning in the nineteenth century, many European and North American observers read such texts in the same way. They considered *Nüjie* and many similar didactic works on women's ideal behaviour as evidence of an *age-old belief* (emphasis added) that women's learning in imperial China was restricted to the training in practical household skills and the acquisition of moral qualities (deference, diligence, self-sacrifice).¹³

Delineating the role of learned women during the two-thousand-year history of imperial China is an intricate process, not only because of this kind of stereotyping but also because education for girls and women did prove a useful vehicle for the promotion of patrilineal ideals.¹⁴ This article will demonstrate those patterns of women's discrimination/participation in learned culture posed by Judith Zinsser in her introduction to this forum.¹⁵ It will, on the one hand, show how female access to education in imperial China further promoted the male monopoly of intellectual authority, and on the other hand, reveal how women's influence in elite culture generated male appreciation and support of women's writing and publishing during the last two imperial dynasties – the Ming (1368–1644 CE) and Qing (1644–1911 CE). Finally, this article will expose how twentieth-century Chinese intellectual and political ideologies helped erase the achievements of the imperial era.

Increasing and diminishing opportunities for girls and women

Literacy in imperial China for both men and women must have increased with the invention of printing sometime around the eighth century. With the first use of paper and then the institutionalisation of block printing in the ninth century, books became more available to greater numbers of people. The first women to benefit from these changes were those who served at court in the imperial harem.¹⁶ Because every woman who shared the ruler's bed might conceivably one day be called upon to rule the realm as the regent for an infant son, it was essential she was literate. Most of the women in the imperial harem were drawn from elite families and had had a literary education at home. During the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) a few exceptional women, including courtesans and Daoist nuns, achieved literary fame.¹⁷

The education of women in the home took on greater significance once the examination system was institutionalised in Chinese life. The exam system was a series of tests based on the Confucian canon and designed to recruit officials into the Chinese government bureaucracy; the preparation for and the participation in the exams dominated intellectual life throughout the last one thousand years of imperial China.¹⁸ The first instance when the examination system was put into practice occurred during the reign of a woman empress, Wu Zetian (625–705) in the seventh century CE.¹⁹ But it would take some 300 years before it was fully implemented during the Song dynasty (960–1279). By then the examination system consisted of three different levels – local, provincial, imperial palace – and had become fiercely competitive. Not only were women excluded from participation in the exam system, but also from employment in the civil service bureaucracy and involvement in public affairs.

But this does not mean the exam system had no significance for women. In many households, women

had the responsibility for the early education of their sons. Thus, among the elite, the choice of a marriage partner by a bridegroom's family would take into consideration a potential bride's level of literacy. In upper-class homes, girls began their education with the same basic texts as their brothers, studying the *Analecets* and the *Canon of Filial Piety* in order to learn to read and write Chinese characters and to acquire the basic tenets of Confucian thought.²⁰ For the girl's family, this instruction would enable them to make a good marriage for their daughter – at around age ten, the girl's parents would arrange a suitable partner for her, preferably someone with the potential to obtain a civil service degree and thereafter governmental office. Once the engagement was made, usually to a boy not older than ten or eleven years, most families did not care so much any more about the young lady's classical education.²¹ Now her practical learning became more important. Knowing how to keep a household in good order and cope with all the tasks related to it – preparing food and beverages, serving, cleaning and washing, birthing and caring for children, rearing silkworms and reeling silk, spinning, weaving, embroidery and sewing – ranked higher in the minds of future in-laws than literacy. At the time of the marriage ceremony, the bride was probably around sixteen or seventeen years old and the groom approximately the same age. The coming of the examination system also affected women's literary life in another way. The prestige of the exams stimulated production in the printing industry, and with the wider availability of books and the creation of more schools and academies, more male scholars had the opportunity to study the Confucian canon more closely.²² The result was a reinterpretation of the Confucian tradition during the Song dynasty, what came to be known as Neo-Confucianism. Whereas earlier versions of Confucianism had stressed the intellectual dynamics of this tradition, 'Neo-Confucianism put more weight on the adherence to proper ritual forms in one's daily life. With some exaggeration, one might even call Neo-Confucianism a Protestant, even a puritanical variant of Confucianism'.²³ Neo-Confucianism, with its emphasis on the conspicuous display of orthodoxy and proper ritual behaviour, meant the imposition of increasingly strict rules for women.²⁴ For example, Neo-Confucian patriarchs condemned widow remarriage and placed a particularly high value on women's chastity. They also criticised the widespread practice of instructing girls in the writing of poetry. It is worth noting that the two best-known woman poets of the Song dynasty, Li Qingzhao (1084–c.1115) and Zhu Shuzhen (?–?), were active in the first half of the twelfth century CE before Neo-Confucianism became dominant in elite circles.²⁵

By the thirteenth century, if girls and women were to continue their education beyond puberty and marriage, then reading was confined to moral tracts and the collection of biographies of exemplary women.²⁶ They were prohibited from studying the major Classics (which boys learned for the exam system) and writing poetry.²⁷ This situation continued for some 400 years, until the late sixteenth century, when an expanding economy facilitated another boom in publishing, and when new ways of thinking about the role of 'feeling' (*qing*) in philosophical and moral discourses affected the literary world and women's writing.²⁸ Scholars of modern China consider the period from approximately 1580–1640, also known as the late Ming era, the 'first high tide of women's literature' during which time we see the emergence of new ideals of female talent in literati households.²⁹

Women in the literary world of late Ming China: freedoms and constraints

Urban print culture by the early seventeenth century catered to an audience that featured women readers of fiction and drama as well as didactic literature.³⁰ Upper-class women were voracious book consumers in the print culture of the late Ming. They read medical handbooks that gave advice on pregnancy and childrearing, cookbooks, guides to letter-writing, household management and religious texts. Despite the strictures of Neo-Confucianism, women also composed texts and wrote poetry. We know from a significant number of extant collections of writings by female authors that there was an extraordinary increase in women poets in this period.³¹ These women had benefited from the expansion of the printing industry that produced numerous lavishly illustrated moral tracts on wifely virtues and collections of biographies of exemplary women, texts that enabled them to read and increase their knowledge of Chinese characters.³² Groups of twenty to thirty women might gather to discuss these works in 'clubs' much like those favoured by male literati.³³ Publishers also targeted a relatively low-brow audience: young women of commoner families might also learn to read with these illustrated didactic works. Thus, now it would seem that a broader female public had the opportunity both to learn to read and write, and also to absorb the importance of their roles as exemplars of virtue and moral instructresses.

The great commercial revolution of the seventeenth century provoked radical new currents in Confucian thought, stressing the significance of the individual mind as the source of all good and all knowledge, and affirming that all individuals could potentially become sages; these new currents contributed to women's access to learned culture.³⁴ This change in thinking also provided arguments to defend marginal forms of literature such as drama and fiction, folksongs and even poetry written by women.³⁵ The 'new thinking' in search of the 'knowledge of the good' sought expressions of pure feeling (*qing*) outside the public sphere of officialdom and examinations, which included the writings of courtesans who flourished in China's richest region, Jiangnan, in the cities of Hangzhou, Suzhou or Nanjing.³⁶ These women distinguished themselves by their artistic and literary accomplishments, including calligraphy, painting and poetry, and came to represent the embodiment of *qing* – male admirers observed the connection between the marginality of the late Ming courtesan and her elevation as the symbol of refinement, high culture and freedom.³⁷ But by far the greatest number of writing women of this period came from elite families.³⁸ Their poetry, and sometimes their song lyrics and letters, appeared in anthologies edited by men, usually a male relative who saw the value of their writing as a direct expression of emotion, free from convention and artifice, and thus indicative of this new thinking.³⁹

Nevertheless, despite the popular rhetoric praising their spontaneous expression of untrammelled emotion, women poets knew that they still had to be very circumspect.⁴⁰ It was not 'decent' for a woman to express something that might impinge on her 'virtue'. Although the writing of poetry was as much of a social activity for women as it was for men, women exchanged poetry primarily with other women, either within the family circle or within a larger local or regional network of female friends.⁴¹ Moreover, as a rule, they limited their writings to a rather narrow range of subjects and emotions – aware, no doubt, of the social and conventional boundaries that defined their activities. On the other hand, as modern scholars researching the gendered production of women's writings have recently underlined, the permeability of those boundaries did allow women during the late Ming to serve as editors and compilers of literary anthologies, and thus to move into non-kin-related space and even into positions of authority.⁴²

The 'first high tide' of women's writing and publishing came to a close during the last quarter of the seventeenth century when Chinese male intellectuals in contemplation of the causes of the fall of the Ming dynasty to the Manchus (c .1644), reached the conclusion that late Ming era liberalism and 'loose morals' were the primary cause of the debacle.⁴³ In response, they returned to the old 'puritanical' tenets of Neo-Confucianism, and attempted to increase the restrictions they imposed on women.⁴⁴ In concrete terms, these tendencies were manifested in three phenomena endorsed by the Manchu Qing dynasty. These include: a state cult promoting women's virtue, especially virtuous widows; an explosion of literature endorsing 'family values'; and not least, critical discussion about women's place in the learned world.⁴⁵ The rest of this article focuses on this last development.

Debates about women in the learned culture of eighteenth-century China

The last major seventeenth-century anthology of women's literature was published in 1690, and it would take some eighty years before the next anthology appeared in 1773.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, there is no evidence that the literacy rate of elite women was negatively affected by the developments mentioned above, and in fact, 'they probably continued to write very much as they had done before'.⁴⁷ The Qing authorities did not discourage girls and young women from acquiring a certain competence in reading and writing, and they received formal instruction from didactic books specially composed for them. For example, the male scholar Lan Dingyuan compiled *Lessons for Girls* (Nüxue; preface 1712–13) which became a popular textbook.⁴⁸ It was arranged in four chapters, enriched with quotations from earlier works that prescribed attributes all women should cultivate: womanly virtue (*de*), womanly speech (*yan*), womanly appearance (*rong*), and womanly work (*gong*). While the young female reader learned how to read and write Chinese characters, she also absorbed the Confucian values of what it meant to be a good wife. Lan prefaced his textbook: 'The basis of the government of the empire lies in the habits of the people. The correctness of the habits of the people depends upon the orderly management of the family. The Way (*dao*) for the orderly management of the family begins with women'.⁴⁹

Thus, education for girls was to make them 'wise wives [and mothers]', but some young women, usually from the highest level of the elite, pursued literary education beyond this textbook training, and undertook classical learning (*xue*) with the aim of becoming cultured (*wen*).⁵⁰ To achieve this level, they studied the Classics and dynastic histories either with female relatives and friends or with private female instructors in their homes. The most successful of these women could demonstrate their intellectual prowess with elegant verse, as numerous literary anthologies of the period attest. As Susan Mann has observed, the eighteenth-century publication craze for women's didactic literature had a 'paradoxical effect': on the one hand, it produced women well-schooled in the ideal of 'womanly virtues', and on the other hand, it led to a rising interest in female literacy and education, since marriageable young women had to have knowledge of all the right books.⁵¹

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the publication of women's writings began to gain momentum, a trend which was to last to the mid-nineteenth century. One can refer to this period as the 'second high tide of women's literature'.⁵² This era differed from that of the previous centuries in

several ways. First, the participants in this new wave of publishing were almost exclusively elite women. No longer did courtesans or the occasional religious nun play a part in the literary scene. In fact, one may argue the writings of Qing women convey an almost unanimous disdain for the courtesans' arts and culture.⁵³ Second, women writers in this period distinguished themselves from their predecessors in the genres in which they expressed themselves: not only did they write poetry; they also branched out into narrative and drama, travel writing and even critical discourse about female-authored poetry.⁵⁴ Some women even compiled anthologies. In sheer numbers, the amount of writing authored by women increased significantly, we know of some 240 published Ming women authors but over 3,500 born in the Qing era.⁵⁵

The opportunities for and the changes in women's writing may be linked to other developments. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Chinese intellectual life had become dominated by 'evidential research', a scholarly methodology which involved the search for philological and historical evidence to validate and authenticate ancient texts, and which put emphasis on the discovery of concrete facts, verifiable institutions, ancient natural studies and historical events as opposed to abstract ideas and a priori rational argumentation.⁵⁶ This research movement revived intellectuals' interest in works long neglected in Chinese scholarship, including studies of astronomy, mathematics and geography. It also drew attention to the role of prominent female intellectuals in times past.

It was in such a milieu of 'classical revival' that male scholars rediscovered numbers of female teachers and intellectuals of the past. One of the most important philosophers of this time Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801) wrote a history of 'women's learning' in Chinese culture based entirely on his own study of the ancient classics.⁵⁷ This well-researched essay presented detailed evidence of what he called a lost heritage of female erudition. He recalled the achievements of numbers of female intellectuals and their writings, including Ban Zhao. Nevertheless, despite Zhang's admiration for and genuine interest in women's accomplishments, his agenda was entirely different. As Idema and Grant write:

His essay asserts that the public domain was the preserve of men, and strongly disapproved of the entry of women into this arena through the publication of their writings. In his view, the sole purpose of women's poetry was to give expression to the 'wifely way'. This is not to say that Zhang Xuecheng believed that men and women had different kinds of intelligence, or that men were necessarily more intelligent than women. If a woman really had talent, he wrote, she should develop it to the full, as long as she adhered to her womanly, domestic duties and remained within her proper sphere of activity. He was concerned, however, that less talented women might publicly make fools of themselves. In his opinion, it was much better for a woman to remain illiterate than to risk making a show of her ignorance. Apparently Zhang Xuecheng did not think much of the published poetry of contemporary women poets.⁵⁸

But Zhang's views were not universally accepted and in his lifetime his ideas provoked a *querelle des femmes* – a debate about women: where was the proper place for women's voices?⁵⁹ Not everyone supposed women should be confined to their own quarters. There are plenty of examples of writings by elite literati wives, daughters and sisters (so-called *guixiu*, or 'cultivated ladies') which demonstrate

their capacities as masters of high culture, their existence being valued as human beings by their erudite husbands, fathers and brothers, and the appreciation of their erudition in their own times.⁶⁰ There are also examples of women scholars who crossed the intellectual boundary beyond home and the learned world of evidential research. Recent studies have revealed those eighteenth-century women who achieved fame as historians, also a mathematician/astronomer and an optics expert.⁶¹ Of this group, perhaps one of the most famous was the writer-poet-classicist Wang Zhaoyuan (1763–1851) whose brilliant linguistic and epigraphic studies of the Chinese language became well-known all over the empire.⁶²

Wang Zhaoyuan was the only child of two teachers who lived in a relatively isolated community on the northern side of the Shandong peninsula, an area far away from China's great intellectual centres such as Beijing or the Jiangnan region.⁶³ Her father died when she was five years old, and her mother supported Zhaoyuan and herself by her earnings as a teacher. Zhaoyuan learned literary skills from her mother, and by the age of fourteen, she could read and write, practise embroidery and calligraphy and had begun to study the Classics and dynastic histories. She also followed her mother's example, becoming a teacher and serving in wealthy gentry homes as an instructor to young girls.

At the age of twenty-four, she met her future husband Hao Yixing, a widower who had employed her in his home to teach his daughters. This was a love match, and we know from the poetry that Zhaoyuan wrote with her husband on the eve of their marriage that they were not ashamed of their passion for each other. The Hao–Wang union was a companionate marriage, one that involved intellectual sharing.⁶⁴ Hao Yixing became a successful academic, passing all the stages in the exam system, and achieved a reputation as a fine scholar. He was dazzled by Zhaoyuan's talents and encouraged her to utilise her linguistic knowledge and engage in evidential research. At first she joined her husband in a number of projects in which he worked with a number of well-known scholars, but around 1805 she started her own linguistic and epigraphic studies. She wrote several commentaries on ancient works, of which the best known is her annotated edition to the ancient classic compilation *Biographies of Women*.⁶⁵ Her remarks and explanations for this collection reveal her affinity with contemporary linguistic controversies and her superior knowledge of early Chinese texts. A number of well-known male scholars wrote prefaces to her study and during the early decades of the nineteenth century Zhaoyuan's prowess as an evidential research scholar spread throughout the empire.

This appreciation of Wang Zhaoyuan's work by leading male intellectuals demonstrates that by the early nineteenth century it was possible for an exceptional woman to gain acceptance within Chinese learned culture. Zhaoyuan's classical knowledge and *kaozheng* skills allowed her to assert in public space her authority as a *cainü* (talented woman). According to Ellen Widmer, the early nineteenth century in China represents a resurgence of some trends present during the 'first high tide of women's literature' when women's literary culture had taken on a 'more public face ... as seen in the kind of contact between women and male mentors'.⁶⁶ Widmer cites two contemporary developments that altered the context of women's forays into learned culture: commercialism and didacticism.⁶⁷ Zhaoyuan's edition of the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* was popular, and attracted commercial interest. Widmer holds such print market interest in women's literary production responsible for 'fuelling the increase in energy, quality, and complexity of women's writings at the time' – tendencies that distinguished earlier achievements of writing and reading women in the seventeenth century.⁶⁸ In sum, what Widmer perceives is a new phenomenon: 'widely circulating works earmarked for a virtue-minded

female reading public (whether true *guixiu* or mere aspirants to that category).⁶⁹ In other words, a more developed commercial publishing network in the nineteenth century reached more women readers seeking the accoutrements of cultivated status.

After the death of her husband in 1825, Zhaoyuan spent the rest of her life preserving and arranging her spouse's many research notes, papers and unpublished manuscripts. With the help of a number of her husband's colleagues, she oversaw the preparation of his writings, as well as most of her own, for publication. Later, her grandson finalised this groundwork and arranged for the printing of the couple's entire *oeuvre* in a multi-volume compilation, published in 1879. Even after her death in 1851, Zhaoyuan's reputation lived on. In 1883, the then reigning emperor issued an edict expressing his admiration for her erudition and her contributions to scholarship, and commanded that part of her poetry and her commentary on the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* be included in a special scholars' library in the imperial palace.

Concluding remarks: connecting Wang Zhaoyuan to the fate of learned women's reputation in the twentieth century

Interestingly, it was only in the early twentieth century, when Chinese intellectuals began their project to re-evaluate their history and to reassess their literary traditions, that Wang Zhaoyuan fell from grace. Despite her obvious contributions to evidential research and the recognition she achieved in her lifetime and for decades thereafter, her involvement in this intellectual movement was entirely absent in the best-known history of this methodology, 'Intellectual Trends in the Qing Period', authored by the leading reform thinker Liang Qichao (1873–1929). He gave recognition only to Wang's husband for his studies and publications.⁷⁰ Liang Qichao was not alone in his efforts to devalue the authority and privileged state of literate women in imperial China. Fellow reformers, as well a number of overseas female students, took part in the process of reassessing the function of female authors in the past and diminishing their achievements.⁷¹ To Liang Qichao and other members of his literary cohort, the writings of these women symbolised what was contemptible about the traditional patriarchal context from which they emerged: prostitution, concubinage and cloistered wifedom.⁷²

During the second decade of the twentieth century, when China confronted its own past in a cultural movement known as the May Fourth–New Culture period (1915–27), intellectuals added new stimuli to this debasement of Chinese women's literary heritage influenced by ever-increasing nationalist sentiment. Consequently, they canonised all Chinese women as 'victims'.⁷³ In their quest to dissociate the past from the present, and to enhance their own 'path-breaking' ideas, they devalued, even to the point of oblivion, what 'talented women' of the imperial era had indeed accomplished.⁷⁴ And even when May Fourth intellectuals did examine the record of Ming and Qing women writers, they were unable to see or to articulate the complex relations between men and women, modern and classical, literature and national politics.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, a small group of people, both men and women, who, despite the cultural iconoclasm of the May Fourth era, considered women's writings integral to China's cultural heritage, pursued their collection, redaction and republication. One of China's greatest male historians

of the twentieth century, Chen Yinke (1890–1969) devoted much of his talent to this rehabilitation process.⁷⁶

Another formidable impediment to redressing and preserving the record of female writing achievements was the political agenda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its portrayal of all women as ‘victims’. Because this organisation claimed the credit for *the* ‘liberation’ of women, the Party and its sympathisers ‘for a long time perpetuated the stark view of China’s past as a perennial dark age for women’.⁷⁷ It was only with the demise of Maoist radicalism in 1976, that male and female scholars in both China and the west began to question the success of the socialist revolution in elevating women to an equal economic and psychological footing with men, and thereby realise the existence and achievements of learned women of previous eras.⁷⁸ In the last twenty-five years or so, modern scholars have ‘rescued’ literate women of the imperial era from the ‘enlightenment’ of the May Fourth period and the dismissive idealisations of Mao’s Communist Party. They have demonstrated how a substantial body of female-authored writing – poetry, drama, ballads, religious scriptures, essays, criticism and fiction – was published, and that some female poets even enjoyed contemporaneous public recognition for their work.⁷⁹ This is an on-going process, which aims to evaluate the complications and complexities of women’s lives in pre-twentieth-century China, not only those female writers like Wang Zhaoyuan who profited from the opportunities awarded intellectual women but also those who had to endure the constraints that inhibited their equal access to and participation in the learned culture of their day.

Notes

Special thanks to Judith Zinsser and an anonymous reviewer of this journal for their helpful remarks to improve this article.

- 1 Susan Mann, *East Asia (China, Japan, and Korea): Women's and Gender History in Global Perspective* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association and the Committee on Women Historians, 1999), p. 1.
- 2 David Keightley, ‘At the Beginning: The Status of Women in Neolithic and Shang China’, *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 1 (1999), pp. 1–63.
- 3 Until sometime in the third century BCE, the language of Chinese texts ran closely parallel to the spoken language of the period. But from then onwards, *wenyan* developed and flourished until the early twentieth century. See Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1997), p. 7.
- 4 Idema and Haft, *Guide to Chinese Literature*, p. 20.
- 5 Bret Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), pp. 114–21. John Wills, Jr, claims in his book *Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 99 that at no time before the twentieth century were there so many politically and culturally active women as in the Later Han period (CE 25–220).

- 6 Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* , p. 119.
- 7 Ban Zhao's extant writings and life story may be viewed in Nancy Lee Swann, *Pan Chao, Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century AD: Background, Ancestry, Life and Writings of the Most Celebrated Chinese Woman of Letters* (1932; repr. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2001). See also Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Center, 2004), pp. 17–42; Wills, *Mountain of Fame* , pp. 90–100.
- 8 Swann, *Pan Chao* , pp. 61–73, assesses Ban Zhao's contributions to the *Hanshu* .
- 9 Ban Zhao was not the only female commentator to this collection. See Bret Hinsch, 'The Textual History of Liu Xiang's *Lienüzhuan* ', *Monumenta Serica* 52 (2004), pp. 95–112.
- 10 On Ban Zhao's authorship of this text, see Chen Yu-shih, 'The Historical Template of Pan Chao's *Nü Chieh* ', *T'oung Pao* 82/4–5 (1996), pp. 229–57. A translation of *Nüjie* may be found in Idema and Grant, *Red Brush* , pp. 36–42.
- 11 Mann, *East Asia* , p. 19; Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* , p. 123.
- 12 Two important studies of the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* are Lisa Raphals, *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) and Sherry Mou, *Gentleman's Prescriptions for Women's Lives: A Thousand Years of Biographies of Chinese Women* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2004). On other modern scholars' interpretations of this text, see Harriet Zurndorfer, 'The *Lienü zhuan* Tradition and Wang Zhaoyuan's (1663–1851) Production of the *Lienü zhuan buzhu* (1812)', in Joan Judge and Hu Ying (eds), *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 55–69, esp., p. 56.
- 13 For an overview of how western scholarship assessed Chinese women's lives until the mid-twentieth century in terms of backwardness, see J. Emma Teng, 'The Construction of the "Traditional" Chinese Woman in the Western Academy: A Critical Review', *Signs* 22 (1996), pp. 115–51. A listing and partial analysis of didactic and educational texts for women compiled during the imperial era is the focus of Tienchi Martin-Liao, 'Traditional Handbooks of Women's Education', in A. Gerstlacher, R. Keen, W. Kubin, M. Mosga and J. Schon (eds), *Women and Literature in China* (Bochum: Studienverlag Brockmeyer, 1985), pp. 165–89.
- 14 Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* , p. 111.
- 15 Judith Zinsser, 'Introduction', Forum: Women and Learned Culture, *Gender & History* 26 (2014), pp. 1–4.
- 16 Idema and Grant, *Red Brush* , p. 5.

- 17 On these women and other examples of female writers during the early imperial era, see Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, chs. 1–3.
- 18 On the examination system, see John Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Song China: A Social History of the Examinations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 19 Interestingly, Empress Wu legitimised her unprecedented assumption of power by means of Buddhist rhetoric and by reference to a particular Buddhist text, the ‘Great Spell of Unsullied Light’, a scripture that prophesised the reign of a female monarch. Timothy Barrett, in his intriguing book, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), argues that her vow to produce millions of copies of this work, for distribution as relics across the realm, instigated the development of woodblock printing.
- 20 On girls’ and young women’s education, see Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 120–24.
- 21 Dieter Kuhn, *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 143–4.
- 22 Kuhn, *Age of Confucian Rule*, p. 42.
- 23 Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, p. 200.
- 24 See Bettine Birge, ‘Chu Hsi and Women’s Education’, in William Theodore de Bary and John Chaffee (eds), *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 325–67; Jian Zang, ‘Women and the Transmission of Confucian Culture in Song China’, in Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Haboush and Joan Piggott (eds), *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 123–41.
- 25 Wilt Idema, ‘Male Fantasies and Female Realities: Chu Shu-chen and Chang Yü-niang and their Biographers’, in Harriet Zurndorfer (ed.), *Chinese Women in the Imperial Past: New Perspectives* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), pp. 19–52. Bettine Birge argues in her article ‘Women and Confucianism from Song to Ming: The Institutionalization of Patrilineality’, in Paul J. Smith and Richard von Glahn (eds), *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), pp. 212–40, that it was only after the Mongols came to power in China as the Yuan dynasty (1279–1360), that ‘an unprecedented institutional support for the Confucian doctrine of male patrilineal descent and inheritance’ (p. 212) took hold.
- 26 Ebrey, *Inner Quarters*, pp. 123–4.
- 27 Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, p. 203.

- 28 Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 18.
- 29 Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, pp. 347–495, surveys these women writers and provides translations of many of their important contributions.
- 30 Mann, *East Asia*, p. 29.
- 31 Kang-i Sun Chang, 'A Guide to Ming-Ch'ing Anthologies of Female Poetry and Their Selection Strategies', in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang (eds), *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 147–70.
- 32 Katherine Carlitz, 'The Social Uses of Female Virtue in Late Ming Editions of *Lienü Zhuan*', *Late Imperial China* 12 (1991), pp. 117–52.
- 33 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, pp. 219–50. As Widmer observes, poetry societies could cover a large area, for in parts of Ming China transportation was highly developed and literary ties between close companions could be continued after a woman married and left home. See Widmer, 'Introduction', in Widmer and Sun Chang (eds), *Writing Women*, pp. 1–14, here p. 2.
- 34 Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 62–74; Halvor Eifring, 'Introduction: Emotions and Conceptual History of "Qing"', in Halvor Eifring (ed.), *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 1–36, esp. pp.11–14.
- 35 Ellen Widmer, 'The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China', *Late Imperial China* 10 (1989), pp. 1–43; Ellen Widmer, 'Xiaoqing's Literary Legacy and the Place of the Woman Writer in Late Imperial China', *Late Imperial China* 13 (1992), pp. 111–55.
- 36 Harriet Zurndorfer, 'Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China', *International Review of Social History* 56 (Special Issue 19) (2011), pp. 197–216.
- 37 Li Waiyee, 'The Late Ming Courtesan: Invention of a Cultural Ideal', in Widmer and Sun Chang (eds), *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, pp. 46–73. See also Monica Merlin, 'The Nanjing Courtesan Ma Shouzheng (1548–1604): Gender, Space and Painting in the Late Ming Pleasure Quarter', *Gender & History* 23 (2011), pp. 630–52.
- 38 Ko, *Teachers*, pp.115–42.
- 39 Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, pp. 350–54.
- 40 Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, p. 353.

- 41 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, pp. 179–218; Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, ch. 8.
- 42 See Grace Fong, 'Introduction', in Grace Fong and Ellen Widmer (eds), *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 1–15, esp. pp. 10–12. See also, Ellen Widmer, 'Retrieving the Past: Women Editors and Women's Poetry, 1636–1941', in Fong and Widmer, *Inner Quarters*, pp. 81–105, esp. pp. 81–93.
- 43 Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, p. 356.
- 44 Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 23–6. See also Kai-wing Chow, *The Rise of Confucian Ritualism in Late Imperial China: Ethics, Classics, and Lineage Discourse* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 204–15.
- 45 Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 76–120.
- 46 Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, p. 357.
- 47 Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, p. 567.
- 48 Susan Mann, 'The Education of Daughters in the Mid-Ch'ing Period', in Benjamin Elman and Alexander Woodside (eds), *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 19–49, esp. pp. 20–22.
- 49 Cited and translated by Mann, 'Education of Daughters', p. 22.
- 50 Mann, 'Education of Daughters', p. 22.
- 51 Mann, *East Asia*, p. 34.
- 52 Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, pp. 567–77.
- 53 Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 127–8. See also Paul Ropp, 'Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China', in Widmer and Sun Chang (eds), *Writing Women*, pp. 17–45.
- 54 Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, p. 576. See also Ellen Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book: Women and Fiction in Nineteenth Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), pp. 1–22; Grace Fong, *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).
- 55 Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* (Studies of women's writings through the ages) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985). This important biographical dictionary is a major source of information on women writers before the twentieth century.

- 56 See Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).
- 57 Susan Mann's pioneering studies of Zhang Xuecheng and his attitudes toward 'women's learning' are extensive. See her essay 'Women in the Life and Thought of Zhang Xuecheng', in Philip J. Ivanhoe (ed.), *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and His Critics* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1996), pp. 94–120 and her translation of the essay 'Fuxue' (Women's learning) in Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy (eds), *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 783–99.
- 58 Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, pp. 571–2.
- 59 Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 83–94.
- 60 Clara Ho, 'Encouragement from the Opposite Gender: Male Scholars' Interests in Women's Publications in Ch'ing China – A Bibliographical Study', in Zurndorfer (ed.), *Chinese Women in the Imperial Past*, pp. 308–53. Recent studies that evaluate a number of women writing in the eighteenth century include: Xiaorong Li, *Women's Poetry of Late Imperial China: Transforming the Inner Chambers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012); Paul Ropp, *Banished Immortal: Searching for Shuangqing, China's Peasant Woman Poet* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Binbin Yang, 'A Disease of Passion: The "Self-Iconizing" Project of an Eighteenth-Century Chinese Woman Poet, Jin Yi (1769–1994)', *Journal of Women's History* 24 (2012), pp. 62–90.
- 61 The mathematician was Wang Zhenyi (1769–1797) and the optics expert Haung Lü (1769–1829). Those who wrote history are listed in Clara Ho (ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Qing Period, 1644–1911* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), p. xxxvi.
- 62 For an introduction to Wang Zhaoyuan's life and works, see Harriet Zurndorfer, 'Wang Zhaoyuan', in Ho, *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women*, pp. 227–30. Other introductory studies on Wang include Zurndorfer, 'The "Constant World" of Wang Chao-yüan: Women, Education, and Orthodoxy in 18th-Century China – A Preliminary Investigation', in Institute of Modern History, *Family Process and Political Process in Modern Chinese History*, Part 1 (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1992), pp. 581–619; Zurndorfer, 'How to Be a Good Wife and a Good Scholar at the Same Time: 18th-Century Prescriptions on Chinese Female Behavior – A Preliminary Investigation', in Léon Vandermeersch (ed.), *La Société civile face à l'État dans la tradition chinoise, japonaise, coréenne et vietnamienne* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1994), pp. 249–70.
- 63 The narration of Wang Zhaoyuan's life here is based on Xu Weiyu, 'Hao Lan'gao (Yixing) fufu nianpu' (Chronological record of Hao Yixing and his wife), *Qinghua xuebao* 10/1 (1936), pp. 185–233; (repr. Hong Kong: Chongwen shudian, 1975).

- 64 Since the late Ming period, many upper-class women strove for what was then a new cultural ideal, the companionate marriage where husband and wife prized each other's intellectual abilities. See Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, pp. 86–90, ch. 5. Nevertheless, 'companionate husbands' were also known to bring concubines into their households, and form liaisons outside the home, though this was definitely *not* the case in the Wang–Hao union. See Sufeng Xu, 'Domesticating Romantic Love during the High Qing Classical Revival: The Poetic Exchanges between Wang Zhaoyuan (1763–1851) and Her Husband Hao Yixing (1757–1829)', *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 15 (2013), pp. 219–64.
- 65 See Zurndorfer, 'The *Lienü zhuan* Tradition'.
- 66 Widmer, *Beauty and the Book*, p. 169.
- 67 Widmer, 'Considering a Coincidence: The "Female Reading Public" circa 1828', in Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia Liu, with Ellen Widmer (eds), *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), pp. 273–314, esp. pp. 294–5.
- 68 Widmer, 'Considering a Coincidence', p. 295.
- 69 Widmer, *Beauty and the Book*, p. 173.
- 70 Harriet Zurndorfer, 'Wang Zhaoyuan (1763–1851) and the Erasure of "Talented Women" by Liang Qichao', in Grace Fong, Nanxiu Qian and Richard Smith (eds), *Different Worlds of Discourse: Transformations of Gender and Genre in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 29–56.
- 71 Hu Ying, 'Naming the First "New Woman": The Case of Kang Aide', *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 3 (2001), pp. 196–231; Joan Judge, 'Blended Wish Images: Chinese and Western Exemplary Women at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 6 (2004), pp. 102–35, esp. pp. 118–24.
- 72 Widmer, 'Introduction', in Widmer and Sun Chang (eds), *Writing Women*, p. 4.
- 73 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p. 2.
- 74 Mann, *Precious Records*, pp. 222–4.
- 75 Ellen Widmer, 'The Rhetoric of Retrospection: May Fourth Literary History and the Ming-Qing Woman Writer', in Milena Doleželová and Oldřich Král (eds), *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China's May Fourth Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), pp. 193–221; Megan Ferry, 'Women's Literary History: Inventing Tradition in Modern China', *Modern Language Quarterly* 66 (2005), pp. 299–327.

- 76 Wen-hsin Yeh, 'Historian and Courtesan: Chen Yinke and the Writing of *Liu Rushi Biezhuan*', *East Asian History* 27 (2004), pp. 57–70. Interestingly, Chen Yinke was a colleague of Xu Weiyu (the author of the chronological biography of Hao Yixing and Wang Zhaoyuan) at Beijing's Qinghua University, which was famed in the 1920s and 1930s for its Institute of Classical Studies.
- 77 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p. 2.
- 78 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p. 3. See also the important historiographical study by Gail Hershatter and Wang Zheng, 'Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis', *American Historical Review* 113 (2008), pp. 1404–21.
- 79 The starting point of much research on learned women is Hu Wenkai's book, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao*. New discoveries of women's writings are becoming accessible through databases and websites. See e.g., the Ming Qing Women's Writing website, <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing>, which makes available works in Canada's McGill University collection and Harvard University's Harvard-Yenching Library.

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