INTRODUCTION

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It was once commonplace to study China’s late nineteenth century using stark binaries and a simple teleology. The historian’s job was to decide if a certain person/idea/phenomenon/practice/institution was traditional, or modern, or a hybrid of both; or when the emerging polity ceased to be a civilization and became a nation. No more. Studies of fin de siècle sensibilities—despair, nostalgia, and decadence—have shifted our attention to the global processes of integration and transformation that engaged Chinese intellectuals at the time.¹ Further, new theory and new practice in historical studies within and beyond China have gone on to rewrite the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century juncture, which now appears as a creative moment comparable to the heyday of the Hundred Schools of thought in the Warring States period, say, or the consumer revolution of the late Ming 明.²

In the United States, this rewriting has proceeded from theory that problematizes the nation. The work of Prasenjit Duara proposed other modes of analysis (bifurcated history, for instance) that permit us to probe beneath the rhetoric of the nation-state to understand the multiple social formations, political processes, geographical and regional boundaries, and other complexities that national rhetoric


² See the stimulating assessment of the late Qing reform era and its historiography within and beyond China, in Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow, “Introduction,” in Karl and Zarrow, eds., Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 1-17; and the other essays therein.
strives to erase. In a recent collection of essays on the 1898 reform era, Rebecca Karl and Peter Zarrow challenge scholars to re-investigate and re-present that much-studied “failed” revolution, which under their scrutiny is revealed as a vast, inviting intellectual and political space where new possibilities and old verities fed on each other to create a dazzling sense of curiosity, experimentation and openness. Finally, Karl herself has written a new interpretation of the late Qing era that places Chinese writers and thinkers squarely in the midst of global discussions of race, colonialism, and ethnicity.

Gender as a category of analysis figures prominently in this revisionist scholarship. Duara’s recent work points to rhetoric about women (good wives and wise mothers) as a key component of the regional, circulating language of nationhood joining China and Japan. Joan Judge has documented the practices and new forms of consciousness, among women as well as men, resulting from the fact that women’s education and female literacy were integral to the idea of a new citizenry in China; she too stresses interactions between China and Japan. Hu Ying has shown how foreign judgments about the status of Chinese women shaped ideas about the “new woman” required for the formation of a modern nation. And Rebecca Karl has argued that metaphors of women’s “slavery,” like allusions to popular “citizenship,” are common products of “an emerging global consciousness” that marks this time zone. In sum, current research on the nineteenth/twentieth-century transition stresses permeability, openness, mobility, and a kind of cosmopolitanism that draws us far away from clean old binaries, inviting us instead to consider anew the importance of new perspectives that are useful for defamiliarizing familiar historical terrain.

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3 Prasenjit Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
4 Karl and Zarrow, eds., Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period.
9 Rebecca E. Karl, “‘Slavery,’ Citizenship, and Gender in Late Qing China’s Global Context,” in Karl and Zarrow, eds., Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period, 216.
INTRODUCTION

The authors of the articles that follow have contributed to and draw inspiration from this new scholarship. Yet they are also mindful that imperial China’s own civilizing project,\(^{10}\) which encompassed Japan and Korea as well as Chinese borderlands and minorities, was vital and alive in the minds of individuals caught up in the political and economic crises of the late nineteenth century. Coming face to face with the civilizing projects of Western Europe and Japan, the individual writers described in the articles that follow instinctively absorbed and assimilated new knowledge into their own understanding of China’s cultural centrality. China’s weakness, vulnerability, and insecurity were far from their minds, and they had no interest in rejecting the past. Rather, like the cartographers and mapmakers studied by Laura Hostetler,\(^ {11}\) they were eager to assimilate new technologies, whether material or cultural, and put them to use as part of their own cosmopolitan equipment for making their way in a changing world. Although gender as an analytical category has been critically important in theories of colonialism, showing how the ‘other’ is feminized and how gender hierarchies simulate other kinds of power gradients,\(^ {12}\) the articles in this symposium give us a different vantage point. We see the turn of the century through the eyes of Chinese women imbued with the sensibilities of the Qing dynasty’s own civilizing projects. Their gaze, far from abject, is itself imperial.

Four related themes emerge in the articles, each a feature of elite Chinese women’s lives at the turn of the twentieth century: cosmopolitanism, an expanding ethnographic and narrative sensibility, creative agency, and gender and genre. As the articles show, none of these themes is “new” to the Chinese cultural context, but each displayed new energy and direction as a result of the dramatic changes of the late nineteenth century. Cosmopolitanism was expressed in a new vocabulary, as elite women alluded to their sense of belonging to “the world” or to “East Asia.” Ethnographic and narrative projects ranged over vast bodies of new material, exposing women from European countries and Japan to elite Chinese women’s critical (and morally


\(^{11}\) Laura Hostetler, Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

\(^{12}\) For a rewriting of the conventions of colonial gender theory, see Ann Laura Stoler, Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), especially pages 1-21 and literature cited therein.
informed gaze. Creative agency stretched the boundaries of elite women’s imagining, enabling them to live out roles they had known primarily through fiction, religious experience, or myth: travel for adventure, business, or pleasure; independent life as an unmarried woman; sojourning abroad, learning new languages and cultures.

Let us begin with cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism by other names was very much a part of the guixiu (literatae, or educated female elite) repertoire from at least 1700 onward. It came with the growing awareness of minority peoples and non-Han peoples that accompanied the expansion of the empire under the aggressive martial leadership of the Kangxi and Qianlong emperors, and it paralleled the dense flow of people, knowledge, goods, and culture between China, Japan, and Korea during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Japanese and Korean travelers were a visible part of social and economic life for highly educated Chinese. Although the cultural context of these relationships is just beginning to be explored in English-language historiography—and although scholars have made much more headway in studying what the Koreans and the Japanese thought of, wrote about, and wanted from the Chinese, rather than the other way around—the exchange of interest and information that followed their interactions has been well established. The Meiji Restoration transformed China’s relationship to Japan, along with the

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13 In Nanxiu Qian’s article on Xue Shaohui, readers will see that for Xue, the term guixiu carried a slightly negative valence, perhaps because of negative judgments of the traditional guixiu role that she shared with some contemporary critics. My own use of the term here eschews such value judgments, though they were commonly expressed in the debates discussed in the articles by Joan Judge and Grace Fong.

14 Fan Jinmin has called attention to the huge numbers of Japanese traders and travelers in the Lower Yangzi region during the late Ming and Qing periods, their purchases fueling the late imperial economic revolution in that area. See Fan Jinmin’s *Ming Qing Jiangnan shangye de fazhan* 明清江南商业的发展 (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 1998), 99-113.

15 Especially in the work of Joshua Fogel. See, most recently, Joshua A. Fogel and James C. Baxter, eds., *HISTORIOGRAPHY AND JAPANESE CONSCIOUSNESS OF VALUES AND NORMS* (Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2002); and Joshua A. Fogel, ed., *SAGACIOUS MONKS AND BLOODBIRTHY WARRIORS: CHINESE VIEWS OF JAPAN IN THE MING-QING PERIOD* (Norwalk, Ct.: Eastbridge, 2002). As Emanuel Pastreich reminds us in his dissertation on the Chinese vernacular novel in East Asia ("The Reception of Chinese Vernacular Narrative in Korea and Japan," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1997), anyone working on Middle East studies or European studies would be shocked by the insularity of East Asianists, who do one country at a time and ignore the others as if they had separate histories, before the late nineteenth century. I am grateful to Ellen Widmer for calling my attention to Pastreich’s work.
mutual perceptions of Chinese and Japanese. The book trade that had once brought vernacular fiction and Chinese classics to Nagasaki suddenly introduced instead Wei Yuan’s (1794-1856) writings on the new threats posed by the Western barbarians. China as “Other” began to move from the cultural center of Japanese elite interest to the cautionary margins. China’s fate after the Opium War became a harbinger, ominously portending Japan’s future unless radical steps were taken to chart a different course. Japanese observers’ impressions of post-treaty-port (after 1842) China, especially after the onset of the Taiping Rebellion, show how China slipped steadily in the Japanese estimation after 1860. Harry Harootunian and Joshua Fogel have both described the two-month visit to Shanghai in 1862 by Takasugi Shinsaku (1838-1867) characterized by Fogel as a “hothead”). Takasugi’s disparaging account of the blows China suffered under the combined onslaught of the Western presence and the Taiping Rebellion holds out cautionary lessons for his Japan audience, complaining about everything from urban filth to the servile attitude of Chinese in their interactions with the British. The widening cultural gap between the two countries was also evidence in clashing views on women and gender relations, as seen in a conversation in 1876 between Mori Arinori (1847-1881)

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16 Marius B. Jansen stresses the importance of the book trade—especially the demand for Chinese books, and the lively Japanese interest in works by Wei Yuan, notably his *Haiguo tu zhì* 海國圖志 and *Shengwu ji* 聖武記, at the middle of the nineteenth century. See *China in the Tokugawa World* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1992), 71-76. [The abridged edition of *Haiguo tu zhì* was reprinted in 1854-56; a complete translation and printing at about the same time appeared in Japanese under the title *Kōkoku zushi*. The *Shengwu ji* was abridged and reprinted in 1850 under the title *Seibukai saiyo* 聖武記撮要 and again in 1856 under a different title. See Wei Yuan’s biography in Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943), 850-51.] On pages 80-81, Jansen discusses the increasingly widespread use of poems in classical Chinese to express political sentiments, even among “rural, nonsamurai village leaders”—another sign of the pervasiveness of Chinese cultural transmission in late Tokugawa Japan. These poems ironically turned classical Chinese into a discourse that critiqued the very cultural source of the discourse itself.


and Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823-1901), recounted by Marius Jansen as follows: “...while he [Mori] counted himself an Asian, he thought it undeniable that it would be a matter of some centuries before Asia could compete with Europe on equal terms and that at present most Asian peoples lagged far behind the level of Western development. In what way? asked Li. Mori answered by contrasting Western respect for women with the near contempt he thought Asian peoples had for women’s intelligence and ability. Did this not prove Asian backwardness? Li was staggered by this argument. Was Mori perhaps a Christian?...” Differences over women’s status as the measure of civilization, in other words, contributed to the rupture after 1885, when Japanese leaders decreed that “Japan should part from Asia.”

For most of the eighteenth century, women of Japanese upper-class families had emulated the lifestyle of Chinese guixiu, to the extent that they could find out how to do so. The continuing exaltation of the guixiu ideal in China and Japan was echoed in the intense interest of Chinese female poets and anthologists in the poetic writings of their Korean counterparts. Yet after the 1860s Japanese views of Chinese women, along with their views of everything else in Chinese

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22 See Patricia Fister, “Female Bunjin: The Life of Poet-Painter Ema Saikō,” in Gail Lee Bernstein, ed., *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 108-130. Fister notes (108-9 n.2) that Yuan Mei’s 姚枚 (1716-1798) *Suiyuan nüdizi xuan* 隨園女弟子選 was republished by the poet Okubo Shibutsu 大窪詩仏 (1766-1837) in Japan, “where it had a catalytic effect on Japanese scholars of Chinese studies, who soon began to cultivate women pupils.” She also quotes a line from Ema Saikō’s 江馬細香 (1787-1861) poem: “My father deciphers and studies Dutch books/His daughter reads Chinese poetry...” (page 109). Clearly classical Chinese influence on upper-class Japanese women was profound, and it was grounded in shared guixiu ideals.
23 See writings by and about Hŏ Kyŏngbŏn 許景樊 (Xu Jingfan, 1563-1589) and Yi Sugwŏn 李淑媛 (Li Shuyuan, late sixteenth century), 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), 209-217, 698-700. Xu Jingfan’s brother was the first writer of a vernacular fiction work in Korean; her poems were presented to the Chinese “ambassador” Zhu Zhifan, who took them home where they caused a sensation and also made their way to Japan (see page 210, notes by Ellen Widmer). Liu Rushi complained about Fang Weiyi’s admiration for Xu Jingfan’s poetry (page 700). The classic anthology of women’s poetry by Wanyan Yun Zhu prominently featured Korean female poets.
society, began to slide from adulation and emulation to distance and contempt. How did elite Chinese respond to these shifts in views of women? Why did elite Chinese women leap so quickly into the spaces opened by turn-of-the-century transformations? The articles that follow suggest some answers to these questions, by investigating particular women and particular writings for and about women.

The self-conscious cosmopolitanism of the late Qing guixiu Lü Bicheng 呂碧城 (1883-1943) is reflected in her language, especially her use of terms like dong ya 東亞 (East Asia) and shijie zhuyi 世界主義 (cosmopolitanism, globalism). In fact, her reluctance to embrace any sort of anti-Manchu ideology is part of her self-identification as a woman of the world who moves freely across borders and cultures, acquiring languages and wardrobes as she goes. Lü’s affluence, the result of her business acumen, fortifies her resistance to nationalistic appeals and class identities. Yet Grace Fong shows beautifully how vulnerable Lü was to marginalization in the very classical scholarly world that gave her education and self-confidence, and in the foreign societies through which she moved. One is led to suspect that the tough independent mind of a Lü Bicheng was honed precisely in a context where highly educated women had to be determinedly independent and oblivious to criticism and authority if they wished to pursue art or learning and the training of other women. At the same time, although her mentors Ying Lianzhi 英聯之 (1867-1926) and Yan Fu 嚴復 (1853-1921) both appear to have had ambivalent feelings about Lü’s success, they too stand in a long line of Chinese male patrons of women’s learning that helps to explain the emergence of figures like Lü Bicheng.

For Xue Shaohui 薛紹徽 (1866-1911), using foreign images as mirrors on Chinese virtue was merely part of a familiar repertoire of narrative ethnographic skills well internalized by highly educated men and women in the nineteenth century. To have such a rich palate of mirrors to manipulate was, for Xue, a tremendous boon. Nanxiu Qian shows us how husband and wife split over the methods and approaches for displaying that palate, but between them there could be no disagreement about basic narrative strategies. The ethnographic curiosity innate in Chinese fiction and biography served them well, alerting them to detail and comparison, and sharpening their taste for drama and conflict. At the same time, we see ethnographic and didactic imperatives clashing, repeating debates that raged throughout the Qing period between statecraft practitioners who sought “truth from facts,” and moralist leaders who believed that every human life
was a living lesson subject to praise or blame. The copious notes, the exhaustive research, the husband-wife teamwork, the categories of classification, all make the Biographies of Exemplary Foreign Women very much a generic exercise in classical Chinese scholarship. What is new is the multi-language capability, and the opportunity to re-imagine, with new ethnographic material, the social relation of the sexes, picking up themes from fiction, drama, classical biography, and poetry, and pressing them beyond ideals and utopias into a lived present.

In Joan Judge’s apt phrase, writings like the Biographies of Exemplary Foreign Women offer up “blended wish images,” where foreign women model in real life what Chinese women have lived in fantasy and imagination. Judge’s analysis of the illustrated biographies by Wei Xiyuan 魏息園 and other writers focuses our attention on the tropes that informed the telling of women’s lives from the earliest Ur-text: kinship, especially motherhood; education and learning, especially talent; and heroism, including the recurrent image of the woman warrior, armed with sword and ready to fight alongside or in place of a man. Confronted with a changing world where travel, single status, and independent social action were within reach for women, writers filled book after book with the stories where the strong willed omnicompetent mother, the brilliant female writer, and the courageous woman warrior unfolded into new domains of life, from nursing to public education to social welfare and reform. Judge stresses that these female roles and role models might have been “new” in the sense of never before encountered, but the impulse for independent and courageous action, especially moral action, underlying their stories was very, very old in the Chinese context.

As Ellen Widmer traces Zhan Kai’s 詹姮 (fl. 1907) jump from courtesans’ sketches to novels for women, she too underscores the importance of imagination and fiction in the construction of gender roles and gender consciousness among the guixiu. Elite Chinese women had been imagining themselves into other times and places, and crossing gender boundaries with gay abandon, for centuries, at least from the sixth century with the origins of the ballad of Mulan. The powerful hold of the cross-dressed woman on the Chinese female imagination was plain in the tanci 彈詞 (plucking rhymes), plays, and poems by noted women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who were constantly reinventing themselves as warriors or as zhuangyuan 状元 (top-ranked scholar in the highest level of the examinations). Even love stories in popular opera, like the tale of Liang Shanbo 梁山伯 and Zhu Yingtai 祝英台, whose heroine dresses
like man and goes off to school, anticipated the plots of novels that Zhan Kai spun for his new audience. What was new in Zhan’s stories was what was new in all the articles we read in this symposium: new countries, new cultures, new languages, new schools, new jobs, new fashion. Was there any reason at all to resist or question or refuse these new domains of fantasy and imagination? Not if we look to the legacy of classical Chinese fiction and fantasy that inspired the mothers and grandmothers of Zhan Kai’s audience.

Widmer’s focus on genre points to the overriding importance of narrative style and dramatization that links the telling of lives in Chinese biography to the telling of lives in fiction. The authors in each of these articles display the fascination with individual lives as historical models that has shaped the imagination of Chinese writers since the time of Sima Qian 司马迁 (c. 145-c.85 BCE) and Liu Xiang 劉向 (c. 79-6 BCE). Special genres devoted to telling women’s lives, as each of these articles reminds us, began with Liu Xiang’s Ur-text, the Lienü zhuan 列女伝 (Biographies of exemplary women). Its many reinventions, in texts ranging from the frivolous to the sublime, compelled late-nineteenth-century Chinese writers to chronicle the lives of foreign women and made it easy for them to plot those lives in a format that was accessible and familiar to their readers. Easier still, it would seem, to place talented Chinese women in these same new environments and watch other plots unfold.

Wanyan Yun Zhu’s 完颜愉珠 (1771-1833) imperial gaze, so evident in her anthology of poems by Chinese women published in the 1830s, and in her own collection of exemplary women’s lives,24 is still visible in writings by Lü Bicheng, Xue Shaohui, Wei Xiyuan, and Zhan Kai. They were not entering a “national” discourse; rather, they were reconfiguring their own place in a world where they still saw themselves and their culture as central, using language and genres from the classical repertoire. How they negotiated their way through this new terrain, with its receding boundaries and infinite new possibilities, is the real story about transcending the outmoded binary of “tradition” and “modernity,” illuminated here in sharp clear tones by using gender as a category of analysis.