CHAPTER 20

Letters as Windows on Ming-Qing Women’s Literary Culture

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Might letters be a relatively untapped means of access into traditional Chinese women’s literary culture? There are at least two reasons for so imagining. Both are somewhat problematic. One has to do with China; the other with cultures outside China. The first derives from Chinese stories in which letters play a role. Yingying’s letter to student Zhang in the Tang tale “The Story of Ying Ying” (Yingying zhuan 鶯鶯傳 and later works based on this story), as well as Feng Xiaoqing’s 馮小青 letter to Madame Yang in the various Ming “Biographies of Feng Xiaoqing” (Xiaoqing zhuan 小青傳 and affiliated works) are examples of what I mean. More likely than not, the first or even both of these letters were authored by men, but the fact that the fictions or dramas in which they appear had such staying power could mean that they seemed at least moderately plausible to readers. Conceivably, real women, too, wrote in such a vein. However few such letters that are clearly the work of women survive. Family censorship would normally have prevented either letter from escaping into the public realm had they been genuine. That a whole set of letters by Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618–1644) managed to survive to this day may have several causes, not least her fame and her talent for literature; it must also have helped that she was a courtesan and therefore less subject to family control.

The second reason comes from women’s writing in the “early modern era” in England and continental Europe. For example, students of China will enviously contemplate the kind of scholarship that can be done on British materials of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Because actual letters survive, not just compendia thereof, it becomes possible to analyze the kinds of ink and paper used and the handwriting as well as what the letters say.1 Furthermore, letters from many different classes of woman can be found.2 No such richness of data is known to exist in China, but similar caches might emerge later on.

What I shall argue in this paper is that even without such archival plenty, letters are still an important means for understanding more about Chinese

2 Ibid., 190.
women of the Ming and Qing. Love letters by courtesans and others from this period have already shown their value as a field of study, as Kathryn Lowry has demonstrated, but I will focus here on the letters of three talented women of the upper classes (guixiu 閨秀 or cainü 才女). I do not necessarily seek the rich expressivity of an Yingying or Xiaoqing, nor do I propose taking such matters as paper, ink, or writing style, as none of the letters I consider are original documents, and some may have been heavily edited. My chief aim is to consider what the versions of letters that do survive add to our store of knowledge of particular individuals and what they might tell us about women’s writing culture as a whole. Their potential contribution to a larger conversation about letter culture generally would be another reason to pursue this topic, but this is only a preliminary inquiry, and I shall confine myself to a narrower field.

Before I get to my main subject, let me review some other difficulties in this type of study. The first is that, whether written by Chinese men or women, letters were often not as highly regarded as other genres. The point is convincingly raised in David Pattinson’s doctoral dissertation on the chidu 尺牘, which focuses on mid-seventeenth-century letter collections. Pattinson scarcely mentions women in his study, but his observations can be applied to women as well as men. He provides evidence to the effect that editors of such collections could wax defensive about their subject matter and sometimes resorted to classical precedents in order to raise the genre in their own or others’ eyes. It may that women, too, looked down on letters. Perhaps we have evidence of a similarly dismissive attitude in the case of noted woman anthologist Wang Duanshu 王端淑 (1621–ca. 1680), who left several letters behind. These letters are not found in Wang’s own collected writings. As far as I know they survive only in Wang Qi’s 汪淇 mid-seventeenth-century letter collection Chidu xinyu guangbian 尺牘新語廣編 (Modern letters, expanded collection), on which more below. The reason for inferring dismissiveness is that Wang Duanshu’s collection Yinhongji 吟紅集 (Collected red chantings)