MING-QING WOMEN POETS AND CULTURAL ANDROGYNY

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No nation has produced more women poets than Imperial China. During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasties alone there were more than three thousand women poets who published their collections. This number, of course, does not include the numerous talented women who burned their own poems. This dramatic rise of women poets during Ming-Qing China (especially after the seventeenth century) is a rare and even unique phenomenon in world literature.

Elsewhere, I have explained this important phenomenon from several perspectives, including that of women’s literacy, of the development of anthology-making, canon-formation, and genre theory. Here, I shall view this subject in the light of the broad context of Ming-Qing literati culture. At the same time, I shall explore an interesting literary phenomenon of the Ming-Qing transition, one which I would call ‘cultural androgyny.’

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1The paper is based on a lecture delivered at the Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut on April 10, 1995 under a slightly different title. The lecture, sponsored by the Asian Studies Program, the Women Studies Program and the Women’s Center, was addressed to the Trinity community on its 25th anniversary of coeducation. I would like to express my special thanks to Mary Ellen Friends for offering suggestions on the revision of my lecture.


3For Ming-Qing women who burned their own poems, see my ‘Ming-Qing Women Poets and the Notions of “Talent” and “Morality,”’ manuscript, 1992, pp. 7–8. Forthcoming from R. Bin Wang, et al. eds., Culture and State in Chinese History: Conventions, Conflicts and Accommodations, Stanford University Press.

The unprecedented flourishing of women’s writings during the Ming-Qing corresponded directly to the male literati culture of the time. There is no doubt, for example, that women’s poetic anthologies had become best-sellers in various literati circles. During this time, too, men actively preserved women’s writings and tried to canonize women poets. Thus, unlike the careers of many English-speaking women poets, the Ming-Qing women writers’ poetic vocation did not arouse resistance on the part of male scholars and critics. In fact, women poets were often encouraged by men to write and publish.

Why was there such male enthusiasm and support concerning women’s publications in Ming-Qing China? Why is it that until very recently, scholars of Chinese literature and history (men or women) have failed to notice this important phenomenon? These questions are especially urgent today because modern feminists have been arguing that women are victims of the patriarchal order.

In response, I must say something about the Chinese unqualified respect for ‘talent’ (cai). Chinese women, however suppressed and mistreated socially, were taken seriously for the literature (especially poetry) they produced. From the Six Dynasties period onward, the concept of the ‘talented woman’ (cainü) represents the literati poets’ attempt to create a new and a special image of women. The ideal woman is one who not only is beautiful but is also talented in poetry-writing. During the Ming-Qing, fictional creation and historical drama especially testify that the prior concept of ‘talented man and beautiful woman’ (caizi jiaren) had gradually been transformed into that of the ‘talented man and gifted woman,’ focusing not on the woman’s beauty but on the equality of the male and female talents. In any case, this special concept of the ‘talented woman’ began to occupy an important place within the Ming-Qing literati culture. Before I explore further into this topic, I would like to say something about the nature of the literati culture.

First, the ‘literati culture’ of the Ming-Qing was characterized by a general contempt for the examination system that had for centuries served as the literati’s passage to power. As early as the sixteenth century the Chinese literati began to question the significance of the examination system with a special contempt for the so-called ‘eight-legged essay’ required in such exams. It was in this context that a new culture, what may be called the culture of the ‘marginalized literati,’ (bianyuan wenren) slowly emerged.

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5 Various sources have proven that Ming-Qing men were truly interested in writings by women. See my ‘Ming-Qing Anthologies of Women’s Poetry and Their Selection Strategies’; and Ellen Widmer, ‘The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China,’ Late Imperial China, 10(2) (1989): p. 22.