GUANGDONG’S TALENTED WOMEN
OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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Recent studies have hypothesized that the eighteenth century is marked by a decline in literary activity by Jiangnan women, compared with the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.\(^1\) Without insisting that this generalization is correct, I propose to take up talented women of Guangdong Province in order to test whether the same decline can be found in an important locale outside Jiangnan. The paper goes about its task in three sections. The first introduces eight important eighteenth-century women writers from Guangdong. In the second section I focus on two other aspects of women’s literary culture that stand out in contrast to the Jiangnan situation. These are Guangdong literary women’s special interest in history and the more family-based creative context in which they worked and lived. The final section explores how Guangdong women are represented in local and national poetry anthologies, especially Yun Zhu’s 恬珠 (1771–1833) Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji 國朝閨秀正始集 (Correct Beginnings: Women’s Poetry of Our August Dynasty) of 1831 and its 1836 sequel.\(^2\) The point is to assess the level of coverage these “outlying” women received on the “national”—i.e. Beijing / Jiangnan—scene and hence to begin to decide how well dynasty-wide anthologies were able to speak for Guangdong.

My chief resource is Xian Yuqing’s 洗玉清 Guangdong nüzi yiwen kao 廣東女子藝文考 (Research on Literary Writings by Women of

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2 I have used the set containing both Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji 國朝閨秀正始集 (Correct Beginnings: Women’s Poetry of Our August Dynasty) (1831) and Guochao guixiu zhengshi xuji 國朝閨秀正始續集 (Correct Beginnings: Women’s Poetry of Our August Dynasty, Continued) (n.p.: Hongxiangguan, 1836), a copy of which is held in the Harvard-Yenching Library.
Compiled over some years by its woman editor, this is by far the most complete anthology of Guangdong’s writing women. Xian, in turn, relied on gazetteers (provincial, prefectural, and county), collections of poetry (local and national), and other kinds of collections, including 詩話 (poetry talk). Correct Beginnings was a resource for Xian, but it was not her most important. As one gleans from her attributions, the works on which she relied most heavily were Ruan Yuan’s 阮元 (1764–1849) Guangdong tongzhi 廣東通志 (Gazetteer of Guangdong Province), published in 1822 and republished in 1864; and Dai Zhaochen’s 戴肇辰 (fl. 1859–1868) Guangzhou fuzhi 廣州府志 (Gazetteer of Guangzhou Prefecture) of 1879. These two are, of course, gazetteers, not anthologies. Wen Runeng’s 溫汝能 (1748–1811) Yuedong shihai 粵東詩海 (A Sea of Poems from Guangdong) of 1810 appears to be the first important anthology with significant coverage of Guangdong women. Of its one hundred sections, sections 96 and 97 consist solely of women’s writings. Wen’s attention to women may have been inspired by the wealth of female talents that had published in the province by 1810. His Sea of Poems became a prime resource for later gazetteers, including Ruan’s and Dai’s, and it was foundational for Xian’s work, as well.

Judging from what Xian has to say, women’s literary activity in Guangdong underwent no decline in the eighteenth century. Of Xian’s Qing-dynasty entries, two are from the Shunzhi (1644–1661) period, four from Kangxi (1662–1722), one from Yongzheng (1723–1735), seventeen from Qianlong (1736–1795), five from Jiaqing (1796–1820), twenty-one from Daoguang (1821–1850), seven from Xianfeng (1851–1861), five from Tongzhi (1862–1874), and seven from Guangxu (1875–1908) (numbers are rough; and many women belonged to more than one reign period). Xian is not able to date every one of her women with confidence, but her ordering is essentially chronological.

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Xian Yuqing 洗玉清, Guangdong nüzi yiwen kao 廣東女子藝文考 (Research on Literary Writings by Women of Guangdong) (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1948 [1941]).

For Ruan I have used a reprint edition (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995–1999); for Dai, I have used the 1879 edition (Guangzhou: Yuexiu shu yuan), a copy of which is held in the Harvard-Yenching Library. The catalogue lists Shi Cheng 石澄 as the main compiler. I follow Xian Yuqing in referring to this as the Dai edition.

Guangdong: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe, 1999. I have never seen the companion volume, Yuedong wenhai 粵東文海 (Sea of Prose) of 1813. It is held in the Morrison Collection at SOAS.