CHAPTER ONE

WANG ZHAOYUAN (1763–1851) AND THE ERASURE OF “TALENTED WOMEN” BY LIANG QICHAO

Harriet T. Zurndorfer

Introduction: The Invention of China’s Feminine Past

Among the best known writings of Liang Qichao 梁啓超 (1873–1929) is his 1897 Shiwu bao 時務報 (Chinese progress) article “Lun nüxue” 論女學 (On education for women) in which he asserted the value of women’s education for the health and prosperity of the nation.1 Although many of his fellow reformers argued at this time that China’s acquisition of Western technology was more imperative than other matters, Liang contended in this essay that the key to the nation’s power and prosperity was the education of its women citizens. Because the majority of China’s 200 million women were absent from the workforce and dependent on men for their livelihood, he alleged, they were detrimental to the national economy.

In their analyses of this essay, modern scholars have shown that many of the ideas Liang expressed in “Lun nüxue” were neither new nor original. Liang drew upon the British missionary Timothy Richard’s (1845–1919) 1893 treatise “Shengli fenli zhi shuo” 生利分利之說 (Productive and nonproductive methods), published in the popular journal Wanguo gongbao 萬國公報 (Chinese globe magazine) (printed 1899–1907), which professed the worth of a strong educational system for women in order to make them self-supporting citizens.2 Liang had served briefly in 1895 as Richard’s secretary and consequently became familiar with

---

1 Liang Qichao, Yinbing shi heji: wenji 飲冰室合集: 文集 (Writings from the Ice-Drinker’s Studio: Collected works), 24 vols. (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1936), 1:37–44. This essay was originally published in his 1896–97 Bianfa tongyi 變法通議 (General discussion on reform).

what Richard and another influential missionary, the American Young J. Allen (1836–1907), were writing about the relationship between the status of Chinese women and the health of Chinese civilization. At that time Allen was compiling information for what was to become a ten-volume global survey of female mores, *Quandi wudazhou nüsu tongkao* 全地五大洲女俗通考 (Survey of female customs on the five continents), in which he argued, following Charles Fourier, “no country can ever hope to flourish without elevating and educating its women.” Liang “adopted” the views of these missionaries but “rephrased” the language to suit his own reform agenda.

But what was new about Liang’s critique of Chinese women was his rejection of those females, that is, *cainü* 才女 (talented women), who could indeed read, write, and had published literary works. Liang judged *cainü* useless and their writings worthless: “a few trifling poems on wind and moon, flowers and grass.” In “Lun nüxue,” Liang conveyed the message that the genre of traditional poetics, in which these female writers engaged, reflected the feebleness and futility of their endeavors: “talented women in the past were capable of doing nothing more than accumulating volumes of poems on the sadness of spring and the pain of parting, chanting about the sun and the moon, and toying with images of the flowers and grass.”

Liang bolstered his critique against *cainü* even further when in 1897 he also wrote for the *Shiwu bao* a biography of the first Chinese woman medical doctor, the University of Michigan-trained Kang Aide 康愛德 (1873–1931), and contrasted her with two specific *cainü* authors Liang Duan 梁端 (1793–1825) and Wang Zhaoyuan 王照園 (1763–1851).