
Susan Mann’s latest book, the 2008 winner of the John K. Fairbank Prize in East Asian History awarded by the American Historical Association, defies simple generic or disciplinary categorization. Mann herself likened this family history of the Zhang women to what in Chinese was termed a “waishi [外史], meaning a history that is slightly outré or out of bounds,” which “records things that might have happened, based on invented or unauthenticated sources, or on gossip” (Prologue, xv; italics in the original). Her model is in part, as she acknowledges, the Grand Historian Sima Qian (司馬遷 ca. 145–ca. 86 BCE), whose monumental history not only set the paradigmatic historiographical model for subsequent dynastic histories, but also bequeathed to posterity his much admired biographical narratives in a literary prose with an inventive style that brings to life the historical figures he portrays.

Echoing Sima Qian’s structurally complex, sometimes combined and overlapping biographies in the *Shi ji* (Records of the historian), Mann designed *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* as a finely wrought and dramatically realized “group biography” of six women poets of three generations from nineteenth-century Changzhou in the Yangzi Delta region. Their intertwined lives are presented in three chapters (2-4): beginning with Tang Yaoqing (1763-1831); followed by her four daughters Zhang Qieying 張絹英 [Xiying] (1792-after 1863), Guanying 間英 (1795-1824), Lunying 錫英 (1798-after 1868), and Wanying 莞英 (1800- after 1868); and ending with Wanying’s eldest daughter Wang Caipin 王采蘋 (1826-1893). Notably, Susan Mann’s historical scholarship on broader social, cultural, and political issues is demarcated by “The historian says” à la Sima Qian, and is furthermore presented in copious endnotes and a long Epilogue.

One might also call this work a historical novel or a family history told in a novel form—novel in both senses of the word. It is an intimate portrait of the emotional experience, intellectual development, and material circumstances of the

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1) The name Qieying should be pronounced Xiying. To avoid confusion, I will use Qieying in this review. On p. 178, Mann discusses the two rare, “exotic” graphs 綉 (xi or qie) and 綬 (guan) that Zhang Qi and Tang Yaoqing chose as part of their two eldest daughters’ given names: Qieying [Xiying] and Guanying. She notes that the *locus classicus* of the graph for Qieying’s name is in Qu Yuan’s Chu ci 楚辭. The compound in question is tixi 纔綉. See *Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大辭典 (Shanghai: Hanyu dacidian chubanshe, 1990), 9,938B. Mann explains that she has followed the pronunciation qie for Qieying used by the authors of Zhang Qi’s biography in Arthur Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period*. However, the most telling sign for the pronunciation of this graph in this particular case is in Qieying’s [Xiying] courtesy name Mengti 孟綉, which uses the first graph of the compound tixi.
major protagonists the sum total of whose lives traversed the immense and varied cultural, political, and geographical landscape of late Qing China. But the textual sources Mann used in her recreation of these women's intertwining lives are anything but fictional—they consist of a vast array of historical, biographical, and literary materials, many of which came from the brush of the protagonists themselves, their male kin, and other family, and friends. They include the writings of practically every family member—poems, letters, prefaces, memoirs, and extend to local gazetteers, genealogies, biographical notices, funerary inscriptions and epitaphs, and official historical documents, to name the most important. Not least is the remarkable correspondence from Zhang Yuesun 張耀孫 (1807-1863)—Tang Yaoqing’s youngest child and surviving son, the lynchpin of the Zhang family after his parents’ deaths—kept by the Korean translator Yi Sang-jŏk 李尚迪 whom Zhang befriended in Beijing in the 1830s, which fills some of the silent gaps. If the reader is concerned with discerning historical reality from fictional imagination in the narrative, Mann candidly states in the endnotes when she has invented a particular “scene” and often the basis on which she has done so. These deftly invented scenes dramatize and round out in particular the character and emotional life of the protagonists.

The story begins in Chapter One with an imaginary scene set in Jining, Shandong, in 1893, where the granddaughter Wang Caipin’s posthumous poetry collection was being prepared for printing by her employer Xu Zhenyi 許振禕, the Director-General of the Grand Canal, in whose household the learned widow had been a governess for some years. He was taking the drafts of her poems out of an old faded brocade box whose origin was unknown to him. I missed the significance of this object that Mann had planted when I first read the book until I went back to look up something at the end of the chapter on Wang Caipin and caught these last lines describing the departure of Caipin from her natal family after her visit with them in Wuchang in 1858, where her uncle Zhang Yuesun had been magistrate and while the Taiping Rebellion was still raging in other parts of China, including their hometown Changzhou: “As Caipin was leaving to return to her parents-in-law in Yuzhou [Henan], her uncle parted the curtains of her sedan chair at the last minute. He pressed into her hands a brocade box. ‘Open this when you miss us,’ he said. She never saw him again” (p. 163).

As the curtain was beginning to close on the last imperial dynasty, and with it on the kinds of talent that a gentlewoman such as Wang Caipin possessed, the story begins again from the beginning in Chapter Two, in the second half of the eighteenth century, with the grandmother Tang Yaoqing as a child of six or seven learning to recite the Analects with her sister and male cousins by her grandfather’s side. The sixty-some years of Yaoqing’s life becomes the large canvas on which Mann paints—with fascinating details—the entire life course of an elite guixiu 鬱秀 (gentlewoman) in the high Qing era, from the innocence of a privileged girlhood to the transition to the role of wife (when her aunt is imagined to instruct her in nuptial matters before her wedding by showing her what would be labeled an erotic album today), daughter-in-law, and mother of four daughters and two