
This collection of twelve essays grew out of a conference at Rice University in 2005, which was a sequel to a 2003 conference that resulted in a Nan Nü theme issue (vol. 6.1 [March 2004]) and a Brill monograph, Beyond Tradition and Modernity: Gender, Genre, and Cosmopolitanism in Late Qing China. The earlier collection focused on the years 1890 to 1910, and this one builds on those earlier essays and extends the time frame from the 1870s to the 1930s, though most of the essays here focus on the years between 1895 and 1915.

In their introduction, the editors frame the volume by calling attention to three themes that have been relatively neglected in earlier scholarship on the late Qing and early Republican era: “the construction of gender roles, the development of literary genres, and the emergence of new forms of print media” (p. 2). The volume is divided accordingly into three sections reflecting these three concerns. Noting how previous scholarship has focused heavily on the 1898 reform leaders, Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929), the editors cite the existence of many other voices during the last years of the Qing and first years of the Republic which deserve scholarly attention. They also rightly argue that the “tradition” vs. “modernity” binary will no longer suffice to account for the rich array of historical figures and ideas that rose to prominence in this complex and important period.

To cite one example, they note the importance of the Wei-Jin era model of the zhulin qixian 竹林七賢, the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove, in inspiring some of the female intellectuals of this era, by adding a spirit of freedom and transcendence to the traditional Confucian emphasis on talent and virtue. Thus, some late Qing women reformers openly advocated breaking down the barriers between the inner and outer spheres which had long kept women out of public life, and they greatly expanded the sphere of women’s learning to include current events and Western as well as Chinese traditions. This Wei-Jin inspiration for late Qing women is an intriguing point though it receives little emphasis in the essays that follow.

Harriet Zurndorfer begins the volume with an insightful study of Liang Qichao’s devaluing of the talented female kaozheng 考證 scholar, Wang Zhaoyuan 王照圓 (1763-1851). Wang, as Zurndorfer has demonstrated in several earlier studies,1 was a pioneering scholar who wrote influential works on Liu Xiang’s

Lienü zhuan 列女傳 (Biographies of exemplary women)—perhaps, the first woman to annotate that work in 1000 years by Zurndorfer’s count—as well as a study of dreams, and works on poetry. She collaborated on kaozheng scholarship regularly with her husband, Hao Yixing 郝懿行 (1757-1825), and was the only Qing woman scholar to excel in that demanding field, so it is doubly ironic that Liang Qichao, who championed kaozheng scholarship in his famous history of Qing intellectual trends, dismissed her work as insignificant. Liang in effect erased Wang’s accomplishment from the historical record. He had dismissed China’s tradition of the talented woman (cainü 才女) already in 1897 when he argued that elite Chinese women (guixiu 闺秀) wasted their time in frivolous poetry whereas China needed women well versed in politics, science, economics and diplomacy. He was so predisposed to dismiss all of China’s elite women writers from the past that he failed to recognize the significance of Wang Zhaoyuan’s kaozheng scholarship, even as he celebrated the accomplishments of that scholarly tradition and claimed to promote a new and more scientific form of women’s learning.

Hu Ying examines the case of Wu Zhiying 吳芝瑛 (1868-1934), the famous calligrapher and friend of the revolutionary martyr Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875-1907). After Qiu Jin’s execution, Wu and Xu Zihua 徐自華 (1875-1935) purchased land at West Lake for Qiu Jin’s tomb where they erected a stele inscribed with Xu’s epitaph for Qiu in Wu Zhiying’s exquisite calligraphy. Hu argues against the grain of modern Chinese historiography that has celebrated Qiu Jin’s heroic martyrdom while confining Wu Zhiying’s traditional artistic role to the dustbin of nostalgic antiquarianism. Before the tomb was destroyed by Qing troops, Wu salvaged the stone stele from which she made and published rubbings of Qiu’s epitaph. Hu Ying shows convincingly that Wu Zhiying defied the traditional cainü model as she adapted traditional artistic practices in public and politically engaged ways. She wrote occasionally in masculine calligraphic styles, performed her calligraphy on Beijing streets to solicit donations, and risked censorship and worse by burying and commemorating so publicly her martyred friend Qiu Jin.

Grace Fong examines the travel writings of Lü Bicheng 呂碧城 (1883-1943), the famous ci 詞 poet and journalist, to make a point that nicely complements that of Hu Ying, namely that this classically trained poet who continued to write in classical Chinese, took full advantage of the new opportunities available to women after the fall of the Qing, to carve out a new identity by building upon rather than tearing down the classical heritage. Lü was a true cosmopolitan who was fluent in English, traveled widely in the United States and Europe, remained single her entire life, and lived as comfortably among foreigners as Chinese. Like
