
*The Inner Quarters and Beyond* is a collection of articles on women writers from the Ming to the end of the Qing. It has an introduction (Grace Fong) and two conclusions (by Maureen Robertson and by Ellen Widmer) that suggest how to read the book. Its authors refer to each other for emphasis and support, the effect of which is to present a remarkably unified focus. A great part of that unity is due to the large body of resources now made available through the cooperation of McGill University and the Harvard-Yenching library to digitize Ming and Qing women's writings. More poets, poems, and knowledge about their communities, types of voices, patterns of writing and publishing can be acquired than ever before. As Robertson writes, using the terms of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (pp. 375-380), the nature of such a body of works is that of a minor literature that is of the dominant tradition but distinct from it because of its separate formation. Women writers wrote continuously, knew each other through writing and visiting, collected their own and other women’s writings, created their own worlds, but also spoke about the male political world, and especially after the 1840s (as Susan Mann shows in her chapter), criticized men, expressed their resentment at women’s inferior status, crossed boundaries of gender both in literature and reality, and formed bonds of sisterhood. They did all this by and large as if the mainstream male culture hardly recognized them, though many men, including prominent ones, assisted and supported them all along. In general, the publication of women’s work could not have occurred without the help of male relatives, friends, and teachers. Like all minor literatures, women’s writing was inherently political in that it implicitly and explicitly challenged the dominant tradition of male orthodoxy. Even though they spoke in a wide range of voices, writing women occupied an inherently collective position.

In her conclusion, Widmer (pp. 387-390) points to three main threads tying this volume together: First, many of the book’s chapters implicitly or explicitly counter the dismissive views of women’s literature found in late Qing writers such as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929). Thus we see active, contentious, and martial voices in the chapters by Wai-ye Li, Mann, and Nanxiu Qian. We also see poetry that is difficult, by which I mean dense, subtle, and intricate, that nowadays can only be read by experts, whose explications of translated poems are marvelous and inspiring. A second thread has to do with the task of retrieving “subjects from the shadows” (p. 388), and placing them in social, historical, and personal contexts. Thus especially the chapters by Anne McLaren on women’s poetry on

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mourning, by Widmer on the various anthologizing styles of women editors, Robyn Hamilton on Luo Qilan 驀綺蘭 (1755- after 1813) and the conditions under which she became a recognized editor, Beata Grant on educated women and their poetry exchanges with Buddhist nuns, and Guotong Li on travelling women and their consciousness of national political concerns. The second thread has to do with exposing the interstitial aspects of women’s writing, that is, “interstitial spaces of hope and desire” and “subtle zones of affect and aspiration,” as Grace Fong puts it (p. 10). A third thread addresses the differences between men’s and women’s writings, a topic that I would like for now to take as a primary thread. Fong raises this question when she describes differences between men’s and women’s poetry about illness, in which men name an ailment in a specific part of the body, for example, something women tend not to do. For men, illness is an obstacle, while for women it is “an alternative space and temporality” in their already more domestic sphere of life (p. 30). As Wei Hua shows, a woman’s poetry and what is known or not known about her life may be taken up by male writers for their own “self-expressive” purposes (p. 147). The poet Wu Zongai 吳宗愛 (1650-74) became a moral exemplar who sacrificed herself by allowing herself to be taken by a rebel invader who then agreed to spare her community. What happened to her after she was taken is unknown, but a male playwright reconstructed her heroism for the sake of public performance two centuries later. As Qian Nanxiu shows, the poet Xue Shaohui 薛紹徽 (1866-1911) dismissed the conventional male treatment of the courtesan-concubine Fu Caiyun 傅彩雲 (?-1936). Instead of the fox spirit/wanton woman of the male poet Fan Zengxiang 樊增祥 (1846-1931), Xue saw her as a talented aid to her diplomat husband serving in Europe (p. 362).

Whether a work is by a man or woman cannot be definitively predicted. Every generalization one makes about ‘what women wrote’ versus ‘what men wrote’ would find an exception. Socially and historically speaking, men and women exhibit general tendencies that can be summarized, but always with caution. How much Ming and Qing fiction by anonymous authors might actually have been written by women, for instance, even works with great battle scenes? Hu Siaochen writes that tanci 彈詞 (verse novels) by women tend to portray battle scenes poorly, but that need not be the case a priori. Still, it is fascinating to read works knowing they are by women, especially tanci, and see how they deal with topics common or not to literature by men. As Hu writes, the tanci “can be thought of as the feminine counterpart” to vernacular fiction (xiaoshuo 小說, p. 250). If as a specialist in Ming and Qing fiction I were directing Ph.D. students, tanci would have to be part of what I taught nowadays compared to when I was a graduate student in the 1970s and 80s. It is not that tanci overtake and replace works like Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase) or Honglou meng 紅樓夢 (The

2) Also known as Sai Jinhua 賽金花.