Book Reviews

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The book under review chronicles the life stories of thirty-three women calligraphers. It begins with Qiu Hu qi 秋胡妻 (Wife of Qiu Hu), the legendary inventor of *diaochong zhuan* 雕蟲篆 (carved-insect seal script) of the Spring and Autumn period, and ends with the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835–1908) of the late Qing. One of the two authors here Zhou Xiaoru, has published two other related titles, *Zhongguo lidai wenxuejia shufa* 中國歷代文學家書法 (Calligraphy of literary masters in Chinese history) and *Zhongguo lidai senglü shufa* 中國歷代僧侶書法 (Calligraphy of monks in Chinese history). While the current volume does not give in-depth discussion of any individual artist (typically two to four pages per entry), it does present a concise survey of the major women calligraphers throughout Chinese history.

The focus on women artists in calligraphy need not be just a nod to a publishing fashion. More than any other literati art form, women practitioners played significant roles in forming and transmitting the tradition from its beginning. Thus, as legend tells it, Cai Yong 蔡邕 (133–92) first conceived calligraphy as an art form, which he transmitted to his daughter Cai Wenji 蔡文姬 (?–220). At the end of the Han dynasty when facets of culture were in danger of being lost, it was Cai Wenji who preserved several hundred classical texts she had committed to memory by recording them in her famed hand. She then passed the art to Zhong You 鍾繇 (151–230), who passed it to Madame Wei (Wei Furen 衛鑠, 衛夫人, 272–349). Even more than Cai Wenji, Madame Wei holds a highly symbolic position in the line of transmission, because she is credited for formally establishing calligraphy as a separate artistic canon through two significant achievements: she authored the first systematic treatise of the art form, the much quoted *Bizhen tu* 筆陣圖 (Diagram of the battle formation of the brush),
and she instructed Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (321–79), who would come to be known as the greatest master of calligraphy. He is still today the model for any aspiring calligrapher.

At the fountain head of the calligraphic tradition, women artists thus were crucial players, both in the receptive daughterly role and in the authoritative motherly/masterly role. These legends are well known and they duly appear in the current volume. Indeed, Madame Wei is given the longest entry in the book, totaling eight pages: her Bizhen tu is quoted nearly in its entirety. The entry also repeats the oft-cited description that Madame Wei’s calligraphy is like “a beautiful lady decked-out with flowers, dancing and smiling in front of the vanity,” the frequent appearance of military metaphors in her calligraphy treatise notwithstanding. For two thousand years, the best women calligraphers were compared to Madame Wei, often less in terms of specific writing style than as a general praise of their mastery of the art. Many women also invoked Madame Wei to lend legitimacy and authority to their own practice. Despite the current scholarly consensus that Bizhen tu was most likely forged a few hundred years after Madame Wei lived, a mythic origin story contributed significantly in establishing a substantial tradition of women artists in late imperial China.

Well before the advent of modern feminism, a few scholars-collectors felt the urge for historical preservation. The Qing poet-bibliophile Li E 厲鶚 (1692–1752) compiled the most useful source book on women calligraphers Yutai shushi 玉臺書史 (Calligraphy history from the jade terrace), documenting 211 women calligraphers. Later, the modern journalist-scholar Zheng Yimei 鄭逸梅 (1895–1992 added another 96 entries with his Xu yutai shushi 續玉臺書史 (Supplement to Calligraphy history from the jade terrace). The volume under review does not cite either of these sources although many of the legends repeated in its pages may have originated from them.

One considerable strength of the current volume over its predecessors is its inclusion of some hundred calligraphy samples, although it is inconsistent in providing credits. In the entry on Guan Daosheng 管道昇 (1262–1319), for example, we are treated to five figures, including the famous Qiushen tie 秋深帖 (Late autumn letter). The narrative gives the conventional judgment: that the letter was written by Guan’s husband the famous artist-calligrapher Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254–1322), whose running script is said to be imitated by Guan and nearly indistinguishable from that of her husband.

One of the difficulties of calligraphy history is that frequently a person’s writing becomes known not so much because of the aesthetic quality of his or her art but as a result of that person’s fame in history. That calligraphy is a medium characterized by its semantic as well as visual attributes further exacerbates the situation. On this point, the current volume is uneven. Thus, there are entries