Mao Wenfang 毛文芳

Juan zhong xiao li yi bai nian: Ming-Qing nüxing huaxiang wenben tantao 卷中小立亦百年：明清女性畫像文本探討 (Posing in a centuries-old scroll: The text/image of Ming-Qing women). Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 2013. 482 pp. NT$ 750.


In Ming-Qing China, socio-economic and cultural changes – in particular, print culture, commercialization, and urbanization – created the material conditions in which representations of women multiplied not only in volume but also in terms of form and influence. In the past decades, this topic has attracted tremendous scholarly interests and generated exciting new findings. Mao Wenfang’s book adds much to this scholarship by adopting a vigorously interdisciplinary approach combining literary history, art history, and gender history. Although most of the chapters are revised from the author’s previously publications, the book as a whole presents a coherent analysis and a fresh look into a much-studied topic. It is dense and rich.

The author treats the introductory chapter as one independent part of the book. This chapter not only reviews how women were visually presented and appreciated in late imperial China but also expands its perimeter to image/text. It raises the following questions: Who produced the visual images of women? What messages were conveyed and negotiated in these images? What triggered the boom in portraits of women during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries? In what ways did women’s portraits participate in the elite’s aesthetic, literary, social, and political lives? What kinds of gendered claims did men and women make through these images and related texts?

Part One looks at two “female protagonists” (nü zhujue 女主角), Cui Yingying 崔鶯鶯 of Xixiang ji 西廂記 (Romance of the west chamber) and Du Linliang 杜麗娘 of Mudan ting 牡丹亭 (Peony pavilion). The first chapter traces literati representations of Yingying in the rewriting of the play and in its illustrations. The changing images of Yingying reflect the literati’s varied imaginations of this fictional figure and their competing interpretations of the play. For the late Ming, three representative visual images of Yingying are examined: the reprinted portrait of Yingying attributed to the Song artist Chen Juzhong 陳居中 (twelfth century), Tang Yin’s 唐寅 (1470–1524) Yingying portrait with its variations, and Chen Hongshou’s 陳洪綬 (1598–1652) two different representations of Yingying in the 1630s. These images, parallel to the contemporary literary explorations of the Yingying figure, reveal late-Ming fascination with the “beauty of sadness” and spiritual transcendence. In the Qing, the author argues, representations of Yingying took a conservative turn and signaled a backlash against the cult of qing 情 (sentiment). The shift in the popular title of
Yingying illustrations, from *yizhao* (portrait of the deceased) to *xiaoxiang* (portrait), reflects the transformation of Yingying from a tragic heroine to a gentlewoman, registering important changes in Ming-Qing gender sensitivity.

The next chapter, focusing on the images of Du Liniang, explores her male and female fans’ differing engagements with this female protagonist. The image/text of Du Liniang – and the ideal feminine beauty she embodies – exemplifies how male gaze dominated image-making about women. Meanwhile, Du Liniang’s avid female readers not only strongly identified themselves with her but also, through their reflections on Du Liniang, embodied and relived her story and emotions. Particularly interesting is the “image within the image,” i.e. the appearance of female portrait or mirror in an illustration, in the representation of Du Liniang. One kind of image within the image is the “woman in the painting” (*huazhongren* 畫中人), a trope adopted by some of the best playwrights. The “woman in the painting,” because of her association with the world of ghosts and immortals, carries the male playwright’s desire for a particular kind of feminine beauty – fragile, melancholic, talented, sensitive, and tragic. This is the mirror image of the literati themselves. In addition, this figure’s constant movement between reality and fiction reveals the complicated ways in which the male gaze objectifies women and projects sexual and emotional desires. Ironically, this ghostly female protagonist paints portraits for herself and forcefully gazes back. She is symptomatic of the evolution of female self-consciousness in the real world.

Part Two studies the images of two courtesan-concubine figures (*jiqie* 姬妾), Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618–64) and Zhang Yiniang 張憶娘 (Qing Kangxi era). The chapter on the legendary woman Liu Rushi examines her multiple images in elite men and women’s writings and artworks from the late Ming to High Qing. Gu Ling’s 顧苓 (b. 1609) famous portrayal of Liu in male attire and literati poems devoted to her image reflect their fascination with cross-dressing heroic women. Literary and visual representations of Liu that highlight her feminine beauty help express the literati’s historical understandings of the Ming-Qing dynastic transition. Liu’s Buddhist and Daoist representations give her an aura of transcendence and turn her into a sensational cultural symbol. Chen Wenshu’s 陳文述 (1771–1843) repair of Liu’s tomb demonstrates how commemoration of Liu was perpetuated in the circles of literary men and women. The author identifies interesting differences between men and women’s enthusiasm for Liu Rushi and the ideal qualities she represents: literati tended to stress Liu’s moral performance or her feminine beauty, whereas women more strongly expressed sympathy and called for recognition of Liu’s talents.