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Our understanding of the place of women in late imperial Chinese society has undergone a radical shift over the past several years. A wide range of outstanding scholarship has brought women back into late imperial China’s cultural history, and new technology is allowing an increasing number of women’s voices to be heard.¹ It has become increasingly clear that these voices often challenge, and sometimes subvert the normative gender expectations established for us by the male-dominated historical record.

It is from this historiographical context that Yanning Wang’s new study has emerged, adding the (admittedly “atypical”; p. 162) category of travel poetry by elite women to our understanding of the late imperial period (c. 1600–1911). The study is divided into two sections: vicarious travel and physical travel (or the “reverie and reality” of the title), within each of which several fascinating female voices are presented in a number of different contexts. Vicarious travel was “the dominant form of mobility” for women in late imperial China (p. 69), and in the opening chapter Wang argues convincingly that *woyou* 臥遊 (recumbent travel) was at once both liberation and limitation. Chapter Two discusses the emergence of *nü youxian* 女遊仙, a “distinct subgenre” of poetry that Wang shows emerged only during this late imperial period, and “transformed [women’s] admiration of the rich literary past into an enthusiastic creative activity” (p. 163).

Chapter Three is the first to deal with women’s actual travel experiences, which for the most part took place under circumscribed conditions and in the company of male family members. As Wang notes, however, pilgrimages and poetry gatherings afforded some women the opportunity to move beyond the inner chambers on their own terms, a practice that tended to attract male suspicion, and occasionally censure. In Chapter Four, we follow the travels of Gu Taiqing 顧太清 (1799–1877), a Manchu woman who seems to have journeyed widely both before and after her marriage, and who left a large number of travel poems in her surviving collections. For Wang, Gu regarded poetry composition “not only as a literary pleasure, but also as a literary responsibility” (p. 117), and her poems tell the stories of various excursions including several that evolved into a close literary friendship network with a group of Han women.

¹ Grace S. Fong ed., *Ming-Qing funü zhuzuo* 明清婦女著作 <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/mingqing/> is one major digitization project that has been used extensively in the study under review.
(although the ethnic dimension is never really explored). A final chapter discusses the foreign travel experiences of a few women at the very end of the Qing, with a particular focus on Shan Shili 薛士釐 (1858–1945), who accompanied her husband on his diplomatic duties.

I very much enjoyed this book. It explores a hitherto neglected dimension of women’s lives and of late imperial travel culture more generally, based on a judicious selection of primary sources, the majority of which were new to me. Wang’s translations are consistently excellent; in their balance of accuracy and readability they represent some of the most successful examples of translation of classical Chinese poetry I have seen. The liberating but also limiting dimensions of recumbent travel for women are nicely demonstrated in the source material: Xi Peilan 席佩蘭 (1762–1820?) line “In the end, recumbent travel makes me regret not being a man” 臥遊畢竟愧非夫 (p. 22) is both evocative and revealing. I found the chapter exploring Gu Taiqing’s life in poetry particularly interesting, and was impressed by Wang’s ability to capture the unique conditions and social networks that made such a life possible.

Inevitably, of course, there are certain areas that might have been explored more fully, and other directions in which the author might profitably have directed her attention. Given the evidence presented here, which suggests that “travel questioned the late imperial boundary between masculinity and femininity” (p. 105), and that the authors of nü youxian poems “challenge the so-called fixed gender spaces of the inner and the outer” (p. 37), I find the overall conclusion that “these women attempted to achieve their own goals without fundamentally violating the gender norms in society” (p. 162) somewhat puzzling. As Wang herself notes, Chen Hongmou 陳宏謀 (1696–1771) was one official who certainly did believe that female travel was a transgression of gender norms (p. 101). The modern scholar Wu Renshu 巫仁恕 argues for reading late imperial Chinese women’s travel culture as a form of conspicuous consumption, a dimension that might have proven very useful to the present study, especially given Wang’s view that a “hidden agenda” of Ling Zhiyuan 凌祉媛 (1831–52) was to distinguish herself from lower-class women travelling at the same site.²

² Wu Renshu 巫仁恕, Shechi de nüren: Ming-Qing shiqi Jiangnan de funü xiaofei wenhua 奢侈的女人：明清時期江南的婦女消費文化 (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2005), 52. Zhang Dai’s account, described in Pei-yi Wu’s “An Ambivalent Pilgrim to T’ai Shan in the Seventeenth Century” in Susan Naquin and Chün-fang Yü, eds., Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 65–88, would also have made a useful point of comparison here.