Wu Renshu 巫仁恕


With an arresting title, _Shechi de nüren_ directs readers into a new territory of historical study on women. Focusing on the intersection of women as consumers and the thriving commercialized economy in China's late-imperial period, Professor Wu presents women as a major force driving conspicuous consumption and shaping its trends. In explaining the purpose of the book, Wu points out that, although there has been considerable research on women and conspicuous consumption, there have been few studies that bring the two together. The book seeks to “observe women's lives and their positions through the perspective of consumption on one hand, and to deepen our understanding of conspicuous consumption in the Ming-Qing era from the perspective of women on the other” (p. 7).

In addition to a preface and concluding remarks, the book consists of four chapters: “The Trend of Conspicuous Consumption in Ming-Qing period,” “Women's Conspicuous Consumption,” “Conspicuous Consumption of Prostitutes,” and “Male Critiques.” Timewise, Wu identifies the years between the Zhengtong 正統 (1436-50) and Zhengde 正德 (1506-21) reigns as the beginning of the trend toward conspicuous consumption in the Jiangnan region, which grew increasingly visible after the Jiajing 嘉靖 reign (1522-66). After a short downturn in the early Qing, it continued to spread from the Kangxi 康熙 reign (1662-1723) onward. The conspicuous consumption behaviors were known in all aspects of life: in food (more courses and more delicacies), clothing (more people dressed in silk and fur), dwellings (big mansions and gardens), and travel (more common use of the sedan chair). Whereas the consumer goods that used to be considered high-end became ordinary, more families depended on the markets for things that they used to make at home. Women were major consumers of clothing and ornaments, so much so that there emerged specialized merchants and shops selling women's clothes and accessories in major cities. There were also dishes, desserts, and snacks made that tailored to women's tastes and needs for excursions.

The book pays special attention to women's travels and the activities outside the home. Gazetteers and _biji_ 筆記 writings show that from the mid-Ming onward there was a huge presence of women, often mingling with men, in all kinds of holidays and religious pilgrimages all year long. Among the most popular were the Yuanxiao jie 元宵節 (lantern festival), the Qingming jie 清明節
(Qingming festival), and the Zhongyuan jie 中元節 (Zhongyuan festival; also called Yulanpen jie 盂蘭盆節, Ullambana festival, or Guijie 鬼節 [ghost festival]).

Moreover, sightseeing trips to famous local sites were also popular with women. Corresponding to the enlarged space for female entertainment and the popularization of women's travels, “painted boats” and sedan chairs were made with extra elegance and new types were developed to suit the needs of female travelers. Contemporary observers reported constant changes in “fashion,” from the style of outfits and hairdos to that of shoes. In the meantime, imperial sumptuous laws were ignored, as women of the lower classes “emulated” the privileged and “did not feel ashamed” (p. 71). While the women from the wealthy merchant families had the most to show in extravagant living, learned ladies of elite families (dajia guixiu 大家閨秀) demonstrated a strong interest in consumption as well, from clothing and decoration to travel. Of the commoner classes, women in Suzhou stood out. There, even working women and maids could dress as beautifully as those in the imperial palace (p. 74). Although rural women generally lagged behind, they did not escape the influence of this prevalent culture of consumption.

The trend of conspicuous consumption was facilitated by women’s increased income and their position in the family, Wu argues. There was a sharper gender division of labor from the late-Ming on along the “men plow and women weave” model, resulting in women spending more time at home and improving their techniques and skills in spinning and weaving. Although male textile workers producing for the market “marginalized” women’s role in textile production somewhat, women still provided a major source of family income and brought surplus finances to their homes through their textile work. Besides textile work, other sources of income for women were available. For example, some worked as “irregularly hired labors” (sangong 散工) or selling small goods to female clients (p. 83).

A major aspect of conspicuous consumption derived from male sexual and erotic pleasure-seeking. Wu shows that the late-Ming saw an upsurge of brothels, erotic novels and paintings, and argues that the Ming and Qing discourse affirming human desire and feelings (qingyu lunshu 情欲論述) provided a “rational foundation” for the growth of such consumption. Prostitution reached an unprecedented scale in the late Ming. In both the Ming and the Qing, courtesans were in high demand and often accompanied wealthy merchants and literati officials (shidafu 士大夫) in their outings. Courtesans (gaoji jinü 高級妓女) were also high-end consumers, who influenced women's clothing trends. They were the regular consumers of “high-end specialized stores” for women, and the daily life of the high-end brothels afforded all kinds of spectacular