
The Red Brush is one of those extraordinary books that instantly become a classic: a most welcome addition to the field of Chinese literature and women's history. The book takes the reader on a fascinating journey into the realm of women’s writings in China across the centuries, covering around two millennia. The volume under review takes its title from the term tong guan 彤管, which first occurs in the ancient Book of Odes (Shi jing 詩經; poem 42 in the Mao numbering) describing a gift from a beautiful and modest girl; it refers to a gendered writing utensil attributed to writing women in traditional China. The Red Brush starts with the earliest extant women-authored writings, by Ban Zhao 班昭 (45–116) in the first century AD, and concludes with the modern nationalist and feminist Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875-1907) who was beheaded for her revolutionary fervor in 1907.

This monumental tome by Wilt Idema and Beata Grant is a scholarly tour de force that delineates the field of studying women’s writings in China anew, on a truly grand scale. It provides 808 pages packed with information about writing women, their lives and cultural contexts, including extensive translations of women’s writings, literary analysis, and details about historical background. The book contributes to a recent surge of academic interest in writing women in traditional China. It is an invaluable addition to recent Western-language publications on Chinese women writers. The Red Brush complements the pioneering Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Qing Period, 1644-1911 (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1998) edited by Clara Wing-chung Ho in the series edited by Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A. D. Stefanowska, while widening the focus. It also expands on the formidable collection of translated poems, prefaces, and biographical sketches edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism (Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), while changing the format. Idema and Grant present a more discursive approach to literary history, featuring new translations of long excerpts from original sources and their literary interpretations. The translations present both new materials and new versions of previously translated sources to the English-speaking world. They include not only poetry authored by women but also prefaces or biographical entries about them, enriching our understanding of the works within their cultural contexts. Added value lies particularly in the interpretation of texts and the contextual explanations, setting a new standard for the writing of literary and cultural histories.

The Red Brush features women’s writings from all dynasties and across the social spectrum. Its sixteen chapters are divided into four major parts with one interlude and an epilogue, exploring empresses at the pinnacle of the social pyramid, women on or behind the throne, palace ladies, elite women, but also actresses at
the bottom of the social hierarchy, courtesans, Buddhist nuns, and Daoist mystics. A new feature is the inclusion of phantom poetesses, fictional, semi-fictional, and legendary figures. The sections on individual authors include their biographies, with translations of biographical source materials, as well as samples of their poetry. Biographical reference sections at the end of the book guide readers to further Western-language sources while another section conveniently provides the references for scholars interested in the original sources.

Part One (pp. 11-195) looks at “Early Models for Later Ages” and starts with a chapter on “Women On and Behind the Throne” (pp. 17-72), including a treatise of the historian, teacher, and poet Ban Zhao who was “the first woman to write a significant body of work in all of the genres of literature of her time” (p. 18). It also discusses other poets of the inner palace during the Jin (265-420) dynasty, women teachers who instructed men in treatises of good government from the second century BC to the fourth century, and Tang (618-907) dynasty moralists who authored works such as the “Analects for Women” (Nü Lunyu 女論語) and “Classic of Filiality for Women” (Nü Xiaojing 女孝經). We even encounter a Tang dynasty slave who raised her status to that of imperial concubine, became a ghostwriter to one Tang dynasty emperor and two empresses, and godmother to the golden age of Tang poetry. She effaced any gendered tone of voice from her poems, however, making them indistinguishable from the works of male authors.

Chapter 2 deals with “Neglected Palace Ladies and Other Phantoms” (pp. 73-131), abandoned imperial concubines driven to suicide, and phantom authors credited with posthumous poems and other works they never wrote. Yet these women, too, are “integral to the tradition of women’s literature as it was later constructed through anthologies and critical writings” (p. 108). These writings express wifely duty, women’s subordination to men, and symbolize the “marginal place of women’s literature in late imperial society” (p. 131).

Chapter 3 examines “Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans” (pp. 132-203). The brilliant girl poet Xie Daoyun 謝道韫 (fl. 399) composed a line on willow catkins that brought her fame throughout the ages, and jealous wives defeated their husband’s desire with literary wit. The claim to fame of some Buddhist nuns derives not from their writings, but rather from the religious texts they revealed and recited to their audiences (p. 157). The authorship of Daoist mystics relates to belief in the existence of female immortals who also revealed texts to the male clergy. Other ladies claimed a voice by taking on the role of spirit–medium, transmitting the words of men to their male listeners (p. 165). Female entertainers embarked on literary and social careers as courtesans. They embodied the perceived brilliance of the red-light district in the Tang-dynasty capital Chang’ an, hosting the cream of Tang poets while matching their literary glory. Some courtesans became nuns and vice versa. Idema and Grant reveal how the imagination of early biographers embellished the stories of exchanges between courtesans and scholars and dramatized the story of a nun who became a murderer.