

Women's Poetry and Poetics in Late Imperial China



*A Dialogic
Engagement*

HAIHONG YANG

"Haihong Yang's study presents a major addition to the growing body of scholarship on late imperial Chinese women's literature by looking into the various strategies used by these women authors to create 'a tradition of their own.' Topics discussed include attempts at devising female poetics, the repositioning of male tropes like 'the recluse' in a female context, the use of 'poems written in jest' to make controversial claims, and the innovative use of allusions. The monograph concludes with a chapter devoted to poems written by women in celebration of the changes in women's education in the final decades of the Qing dynasty. In each chapter, a general introduction precedes a more detailed case study. It has to be considered a strength of this volume that each chapter tantalizingly leaves the reader wishing for a more comprehensive treatment of its theme."

—WILT L. IDEMA, *Harvard University*

"This study is commendable for its groundbreaking analytical approach, which draws inspiration from both traditional Chinese 'intuitive' criticism and Western cultural theory. Haihong Yang has asked great questions about Chinese women poets, making this book both engaging and thought provoking."

—KANG-I SUN CHANG, *Yale University*

"This new and long-awaited study provides an in-depth examination of women's poetic contribution to classical Chinese literature. It focuses on women writers' participation in the construction of literary conventions through reassessing their poetic creations and interactions with their predecessors and contemporaries and by remapping their relations with, and positions within, the male canons of late imperial China. The author aptly genders conventional poetic techniques, topics, and subgenres to nuance their performances in women's poetry, showing women's courageous renovation of male poetics and their inventiveness in nurturing a counterpart of their own. This book enriches our understanding of women's accomplishments yet to be fully explored in classical Chinese literature."

—NANXIU QIAN, *Rice University*

Women's Poetry and Poetics in Late Imperial China: A Dialogic Engagement examines women-authored poetry and poetic criticism in late imperial China. It provides close readings of original texts to explore the poetic forms and devices women poets employed to place their work into the context of the wider literary history of the period and to analyze how they asserted their own agency to negotiate their literary, social, and political concerns. The author also investigates the interactions between women's poetic creations and existing male scholarly discourses and probes how these interactions generated innovative self-identities and renovations in poetic forms and aesthetics.

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A Dialogic Engagement

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To my parents,
Jiya Lu and Shengquan Yang

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Introduction

This book is an investigation of how women writers in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, often referred to as the late imperial period, participated in the construction of literary conventions with their *shi* 詩 poems and criticisms on *shi* poetry. *Shi* is a particular poetic form using lines of four, five, or seven characters in length. It often follows strict tonal patterns and develops an aesthetics of parallelism. As Burton Watson points out in an early study of *shi* as a literary form, *shi* poetry is not only “as old as Chinese literature itself,” but is “the vehicle to which the Chinese have entrusted their profoundest and most heartfelt utterances, the form that has come to be recognized as characteristic of the Chinese poetic spirit at its greatest.”¹ Yet for centuries, women have been excluded from this form. One obvious reason is that women have a much lower chance of receiving an education than men do. However, even though women did write poems and poetic criticisms, their works are often neglected, if not belittled, and their contribution to the construction and evolving of this poetic form has been ignored.

The emergence of women writers as a discernable group in the late imperial period gradually yet unquestionably changed the landscape of *shi* poetry as a result of “remarkable developments in commercial print culture and the spread of literacy and education to a wider public.”² In content, women-authored poems often experiment with new poetic subjects or provide new perspectives of already popular themes when the poets write about their life experiences as women. In form, women writers resort to innovative poetic devices and create aestheticisms often deviating from those of the literati when they strive for their own voices to be heard. The dilemma which women writers encounter is two-fold. They have to write in a poetic language in which they are often treated as objects without much agency. The vast poetic

tradition is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because of the rich repertoire of themes, subgenres, images, and devices to be employed and the thousands of writers and their poems as well as poetic schools to be studied and followed as models. However, this extremely profuse tradition is mostly relevant to male-specific experiences. At its core, (male) literati are the ones who established the standards of evaluation and served as judges. When women employed such poetic language to describe their own bodies, own thoughts, own feelings, and told their own stories, they had no other choice but to appropriate this language not only for themselves to be heard and understood, but to reinscribe their existence in their own writings. Until very recently, the impact of women writers' appropriation of this poetic language has been severely underestimated, if not totally ignored.

In this book, I examine the interactions between women's poetic creations and the existing discourses in the literati tradition and study how these interactions generate innovative self-reinscription and renovations in poetic forms and aesthetics. Women writers, just like their male literati counterparts, wrote within a vast and heterogeneous literati tradition. At the same time, they also wrote beyond that tradition. The tension between women's acts of writing and self-reinscription on the one hand and the cultural and social limitations on their writing contexts on the other results in a discernible women's writing tradition, a heterogeneous and continuous process of construction rather than a stable and static existence.

Close reading of women-authored poems and poetics generates fruitful discoveries when it engages these texts in dialogue with others writers, male and female, past and future. It helps us avoid gynocentric and essentialist traps while reintroducing women and their works into Chinese literary history. Such a dialogic approach enables us to historicize our reading of women's poetry and poetics within their social, cultural, and political contexts, and thus base our reading of the original materials on both their presence and absence from certain dialogues. It is not only contingent on our comprehension of the genre of *shi* poetry, but in turn expands and deepens it.

A dialogic approach to women's poetic creations means (re-)interpreting their dynamic interplay both with the literati tradition and with each other. As suggested by the metaphor of dialogue, this approach focuses on both connections, overlaps, shared elements, and differences between women's poetic works and the literati tradition. The approach has two dimensions. Social functions of lyric poetry in dynastic China give women's poetry a "horizontal" dimension. This dimension refers to the fulfillment of a woman's self-inscription and negotiation of literary and social concerns through poetic reciprocation with the poet's social relations. Just as poems by male writers, a majority of women-authored poems were a social currency written and exchanged to establish or maintain social relations or to accomplish social tasks. As a socially sanctioned genre, *shi* poetry played multiple roles in

gentry women's lives. It helped to establish relations and facilitate interpersonal communications when the poems were composed to celebrate a birthday, sent as a letter to a family member or friend who traveled afar, written at a poem composition contest, or inscribed on a painting. The rediscovery of thousands of poems by women in the past three decades has overthrown the patriocentric belief that women's lyric poems were written solely for themselves or their husbands/male lovers, as if they either did not have or need an immediate audience other than their husbands/male lovers, or that this audience could be anyone and would not have any impact on the interpretations of the poems.³ Indeed, women's poems are often trivialized either because of their "unimportant" topics on women's everyday life within the inner chambers, or because they were addressed to another "unimportant" woman. An awareness of the "horizontal" dimension restores the connections between women and the world in which they wrote and contextualizes women's artistic executions of these connections in their *shi* poems and poetics.

A dialogic approach also consists of a "vertical" dimension referring to the interactions between women's lyric poetry and narratives, on one hand, or in many cases, the absence of narratives on women and by women on the other. As an important literary genre, Chinese lyric poetry has a vital relationship to narratives. In the case of women's *shi* poetry, the scarcity and lack of variety of narratives on women and their poetry provide us the ground to theorize on women-authored poetry and poetics by viewing women's interaction with this "lack" in their poetic works. The vertical dimension sheds light on the hard efforts of women writers in constructing poetic narratives on women. In addition, the vertical dimension also refers to women's reciprocal relationships to existing poems and poetic discourses. On one hand, women were excluded from, ignored, or despised by mainstream literati tradition most of the time. On the other, women were profoundly connected to this tradition due to the fact that in the Chinese lyric tradition, "creativity" by definition differs from the common understanding of contemporary readers.

The Oxford Dictionary defines *creativity* as "the use of the imagination or original ideas." To common readers of English, *creativity* connotes originality, or in other words, something different from existing things. In the case of classical Chinese lyric poetry, although it also often applauds originality in a poem, a "good" poem is also required to show at least some connections with existing discourses. These connections are achieved through allusions, in addition to openly acknowledged borrowings of titles, motifs, or images from early poems, or the use of rhyming characters to harmonize with poems by other writers. In many cases, these connections are viewed as a touchstone of a writer's poetic skills. A skilled writer is expected to demonstrate her knowledge of existing discourses and her capability to seamlessly incorporate them into her own poems. Due to formal restrictions on lyric poems,

incorporation of existing discourses can be challenging and often serves as a barometer for a good poem. Allusion provides a good example illustrating how these connections are valued in this poetic tradition. Allusion serves as a discursive arena of competition between the writer who initially uses an expression and those who borrow it and between the writer and the reader who is expected to decode the borrowing. Indeed, this decoding also serves as an important source of the pleasure of reading.

A dialogic approach to women's *shi* poetry aims to read women-authored poems by exploring their "vertical" and "horizontal" dimensions. When creativity was by definition contingent on knowledge of the old, women inevitably had to address their relationship to the tradition overtly or covertly before they could transcend it. Most of the time, their relationship to old knowledge was bittersweet since it both nourished and limited them. Their poems, therefore, were affected by their negotiations with the tradition and their efforts to transcend its confines. By participating in the dialogues with existing discourses, women writers engaged themselves in constructing and transforming these discourses and redefining various social and cultural norms.

The influence of women-authored *shi* poems and poetic criticisms on the genre are inseparable from the conflicts between literary conventions and the gender norms within the patriarchal society on one hand and the women's own agenda on the other. These conflicts constitute an arena where innovations in the conventions and norms underwent a process of constant modification. Despite its fluctuation in popularity, *shi* poetry had enjoyed incomparable privilege in the social life of the educated, mainly males from noble and gentry-class families, until the very end of the imperial period. As Zong-Qi Cai succinctly summarizes in his introduction to *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*, *shi* poetry became an "indispensable medium of self-expression, social criticism, and even career advancement."⁴ In addition, *shi* poetry also played an irreplaceable role in building social connections. When women trespassed into the field of poetic composition, they brought uncertainties to the established genre. While *shi* poetry is often treated as autobiographical, to what extent could a woman express a "self" sincere enough to be credible, and yet conformable enough to avoid censorship or even trouble in her personal life? How shall we read the poetic "self" in her poem when the genre has been excluding her for hundreds of years and when the very idea of expressing herself to an audience beyond her immediate family could bring severe criticism, suspicion of her moral qualities, and even denial of her femininity? Since gender norms designated women's roles within the extended families and totally denied them a career in public service, why did women write poems as social criticism? How did they justify their involvement in public affairs via writing poetry? How were their poetic comments on these affairs received? When women used poems to build social connections, to what extent did their poetic representations of these

connections differ from those in male literati writings? Answers to these questions provide us with a breakthrough point to understand the interactions between women's poetic writing and the established literary conventions.

Women writers' contributions to the innovation of the literary conventions of *shi* poetry can be found in fields varying from themes, subgenres, poetic devices, to the construction of new traditions. Up to the late imperial period, *shi* poetry had witnessed a gradual expansion in themes. Often in literati's poems, women are either absent or objectified as themes. Women's experiences with their own bodies and the world around them had not turned into a recognizable theme until women picked up the writing brush and became writers themselves. During its hundreds of years of development, *shi* poetry also has developed dozens of subgenres, some of which overlap. Women-authored poems not only enriched almost all the subgenres, but from time to time challenged the denotations and connotations of established subgenres and destabilized the aesthetic standards catering to literati's taste. As a form of art, *shi* poetry demands the use of various poetic devices intrinsic to the achievement of its artistic goals. Besides rules of tonal patterns and rhythms, allusions, tropes, and imageries are among the most important and frequently employed devices. All three are deeply rooted in larger social and literary traditions and contexts where women had such limited agency that they were either completely invisible, or where, when, and how they became visible was decided by men only. To a certain extent, these devices functioned at the price of women who were neglected or stereotyped. Women writers did not have other choices but to innovate these devices in order to convey their own messages with their poems. Women's appropriation and innovation of the poetic language in almost all aspects coincide with the process of the construction of a women's writing tradition. The construction of such a tradition features two concurrent aspects which are mutually reinforcing: women writers' efforts to reinterpret the existing tradition and their conscious building of a group identity with their contemporaries as well as their predecessors. In their poems and poetics, women re-introduced their predecessors as early as those women poets in the *Classics of Poetry* and emphasized women's contributions to the initiation and development of the genre. Women also vigorously exchanged poems with one another, commented on one another's works, and quoted lines from other women's poems. Anthologies of women-authored poetry compiled by women critics serve as landmarks of women's conscious construction of a new women's writing tradition and aestheticism. This book is an attempt to explore women writers' impact on the literary conventions in all the above-mentioned fields.

In this book, I probe into four aspects of the *shi* genre: traditions, tropes, subgenres, and poetic devices. Examination of these aspects reveals how women write against as well as within the poetic language and consequently reconstruct literary conventions and invent literary traditions that include

women. Due to the limited scope, I focus on one item of each aspect. Chapter 1 investigates the efforts of women critics to establish a women's writing tradition by compiling anthologies of women's poetry and writing poetics in verse to participate in debates on literary issues. This chapter provides an overview of how women endeavored to reintroduce writers of their own gender into the entire literary history and to invent a discernible tradition of their own. I study the strategies which women critics employed to (re-)evaluate poetic creations by other women, propose aesthetic approaches deviating from phallogocentric standards, establish a women's writing tradition, and participate in the construction of important literary discourse on women's poetry. My theoretic examination is based on an analysis of two cases: Wang Duanshu's (1621–ca. 1685) *Poetic Apocrypha by Famous Women: First Collection* (Mingyuan shiwei chubian) which is an ambitious collection of women-authored poems, and women's poetics in verse (*lun shi shi* 論詩詩), a subgenre of traditional poetic criticism.

In chapter 2, I examine the trope of “withdrawing from public service” (*yin* 隱) in poems by Yi Lin (1616–1685) and Huang Yuanjie (fl. mid-seventeenth century), the two writers whose lives and works were significantly influenced by the calamities during the Ming-Qing transition. The trope of “withdrawal” is formerly associated with the identity of male scholar-officials since women were totally excluded from public service. However, Li Yin and Huang Yuanjie constantly appropriate the prominent trope for self-representation and endow the speaking voices in their poetry with an agency and new subject positions that were denied to them in reality. This chapter exemplifies how women are challenged with a poetic language which excludes them and how they appropriate such a language to make social and political critiques. The trope of *yin* not only plays a significant role in the writers' poetic delineation and aesthetization of their experiences, but is closely related to their fantasies and anxieties, as well as their reflections and critiques on social and political issues. A close reading of how Li Yin and Huang Yuanjie appropriated the well-established trope for their own poetic agendas provides another example illustrating the relationship between women's writing and the literati tradition.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the rarely studied subgenre of “teasingly composed poetry” (*xi ti shi* 戲題詩) by women. Despite its seemingly frivolous title, this genre provides women with a precious chance to reflect on gender relationships from women's perspectives and to demonstrate their sense of humor which is often neglected, if not despised. Though not numerous in quantity, women's teasingly (I also interchangeably use the phrase “playfully”) composed poems are valuable since they provide poetic depictions of an inclusive scenario of women's daily lives and render a valid poetic interpretation of women's experiences. Playfulness in women's poems helps us better understand how women participated in the construction and modification