

PRECIOUS RECORDS

*Women in
China's Long
Eighteenth
Century*



Susan Mann

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SUSAN MANN

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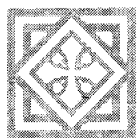
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To the memory of

Wanyan Yun Zhu

萬歲



Acknowledgments

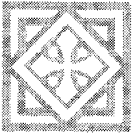
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S.M.



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Introduction

OUTSIDE OF CHINA, RESEARCH ON the history of Chinese women is just beginning, and scholars everywhere have barely tapped the wealth of work left by China's women writers. This book presents no more than a preliminary sense of what women felt and believed, and what they actually did, during one short period. My most important sources have been women's writings, mainly poetry. I have also drawn on familiar historical sources written by men: biography and epitaphs, local histories and government documents. Women and gender relations figure in men's essays on statecraft—policy recommendations written by bureaucrats for practical use in local administration—and in their scholarly studies of ritual, art, and literature. Analyzing these familiar sources, written by men, in conjunction with women's own writings opens a new window on the world of Chinese women.

Among these many sources, biography is the richest. Biographies of Chinese women were published by the thousands. They can be found as epitaphs and short anecdotal sketches, in local histories (called gazetteers), and in the collected literary works of published scholars, who regularly wrote about women they loved or admired. Most often honored in these writings were mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and stepmothers—the writer's own or those

of a close friend. Also included were individuals we might call saints (Daoist adepts or Buddhist nuns) and special heroines who distinguished themselves by their courage (defending father, wrongfully jailed on a trumped-up charge, for instance, or saving mother from a charging tiger). In the late imperial period, loosely defined as the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, virtually all biographies of so-called exemplary women told stories about martyrs (women who died or committed suicide resisting rape) or widows who scorned remarriage and remained celibate.

Special collections of biographies of model women supplied the archetypes for these biographical forms.¹ The earliest surviving collection, *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü zhuan*), was compiled during the early Han period by the scholar Liu Xiang (77–6 B.C.E.). Stories in Liu Xiang's collection illustrate the virtues associated with proper womanly behavior in Confucian families and warn against the vices of jealous, vindictive, and evil women. Another early collection, the *Biographies of Nuns* (*Biqiuni zhuan*), compiled in 517 by Shi Baochang, tells the life histories of the cultivated religious women of the Six Dynasties era (C.E. 220–589).² Both these traditions of female biography—the Confucian and the Buddhist—were carried on by eighteenth-century scholars, as we shall see.

Confucian scholars favored biography as the quintessence of historical writing because, they believed, individual lives illustrated the basic principles of praise and blame that made the historical record instructive for future generations. As Denis Twitchett has pointed out, Chinese historians wrote biography to “illustrate the Confucian virtues of their subject” by linking the subject with a paragon of virtue from the ancient past.³ Confucian biography could be negative as well as positive, as in Liu Xiang's collection. But as time passed, negative models disappeared from didactic works, while positive models for womanly behavior changed. After the Tang dynasty (618–906), individualized tales of ascetics, mystics, and bold, independent filial daughters fade from the historical record. In their stead we find myriad repetitious formulaic stories of women who commit suicide in the name of chastity or who dedicate their lives to serving their parents-in-law in the name of celibate widowhood.

This distinctive style in late imperial biographies of women was partly a response to aggressive government campaigns promoting Confucian models of moral behavior among the common people. The Mongol Yuan dynasty was the first to construct monumental arches honoring chaste women and the first to offer imperial inscriptions of merit to families of chaste widows and female martyrs. Government campaigns promoting female chastity began in earnest under the first Ming emperor. Although, like all imperial policies, these campaigns waxed and waned, they reached a peak during the High Qing era

(c. 1683–1839).^{*} At the same time, over the course of the Ming and Qing periods, ideals of chaste womanhood shifted slightly. For example, Ming rules honored a local custom that was especially visible in a few localities, a practice much like the practice of *sati* in colonial Bengal in which young widows “followed their husbands in death” by starving themselves, strangling on their own sashes, drowning in wells or rivers, or even hanging themselves publicly on a platform. By contrast, early Qing rulers deplored widow suicide. The Yongzheng emperor published attacks on the custom, deriding women who embraced it as cowards who could not face up to the harsh demands of life as a widow. As a result of these Qing policies, even though martyrdom to preserve chastity remained a prominent theme in the biographies of model women during the eighteenth century, long-suffering celibate widows greatly overshadow dramatic suicides in High Qing women’s biographies. In this way, the changing character of female biography points to historical shifts in the ideals for women’s behavior in late imperial China.

Valuable as they are to historians of women, however, these biographies written by men grow opaque when we try to understand what women themselves thought or believed. For this reason, the women in High Qing biographies seem to represent quintessential objects of a “male gaze.” They are literary subjects constructed for specific historical purposes. We cannot expect to find in these stories traces of women’s own subjectivity. At the same time, studies of gender relations in Chinese history have demonstrated that elite women and men shared many assumptions about Confucian virtue and its proper representation in women’s lives.⁴ Consequently women’s biographies, even though written by men, contain invaluable evidence about gender relations in High Qing society and reveal some of the reasons why a young woman might contemplate suicide or deny her sexuality. Fortunately, however, late imperial sources are not limited to writings by men. During the High Qing era, published work by women came into its own. The first anthologies of women’s writing, edited by women, appeared in print. Elite families reveled in the achievements of erudite mothers and daughters and published their writing in separate editions, not just as appendages to the collected writings of their kinsmen. These published collections of women’s writing without doubt constitute the most valuable source we have for the study of Chinese women in the premodern era. Virtually all of the women’s writing that survives is poetry.

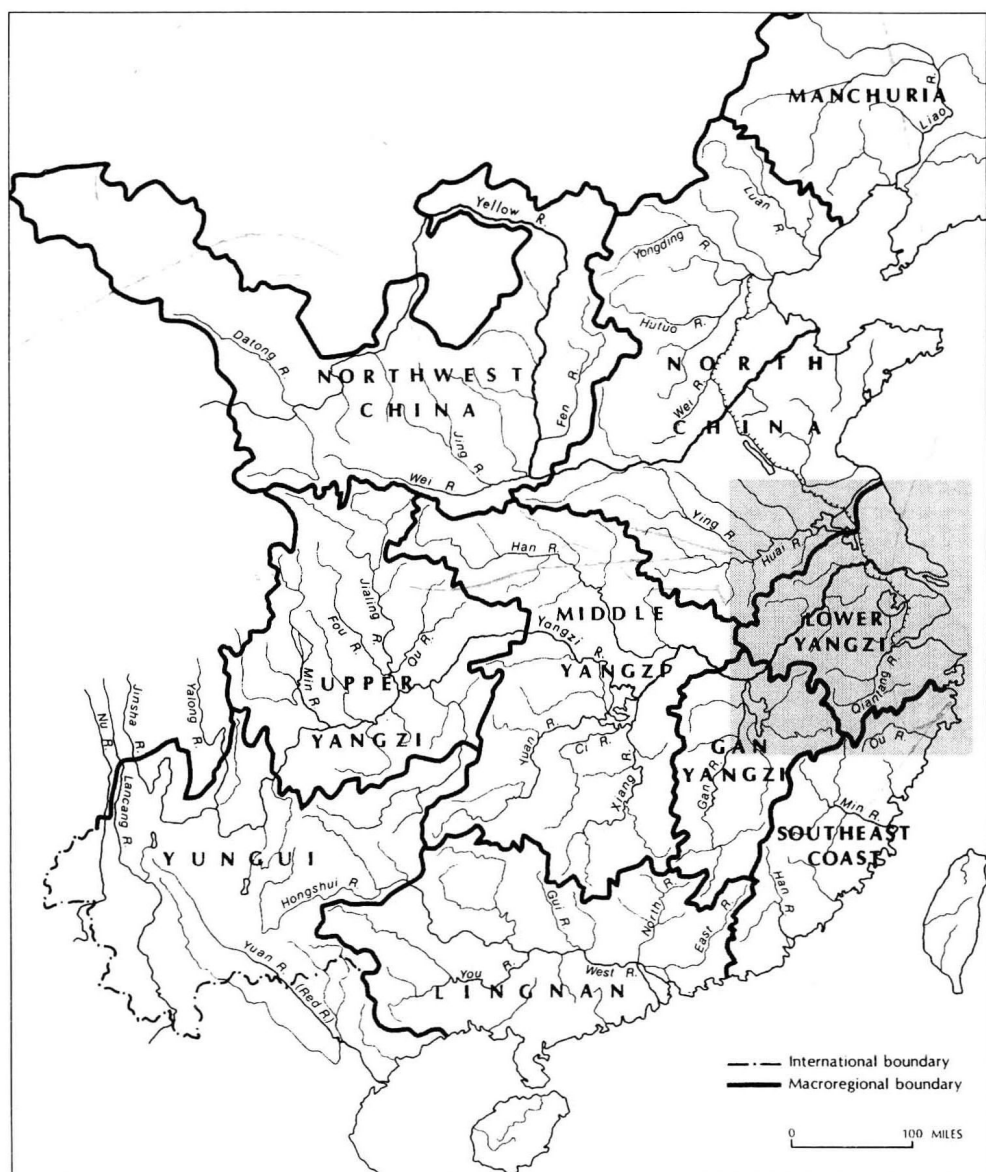
As I was beginning my research on this book, some of my colleagues in the United States had begun to explore this territory and write about their

^{*}The phrase “High Qing,” as used in this book, is defined and discussed in Chap. 2.

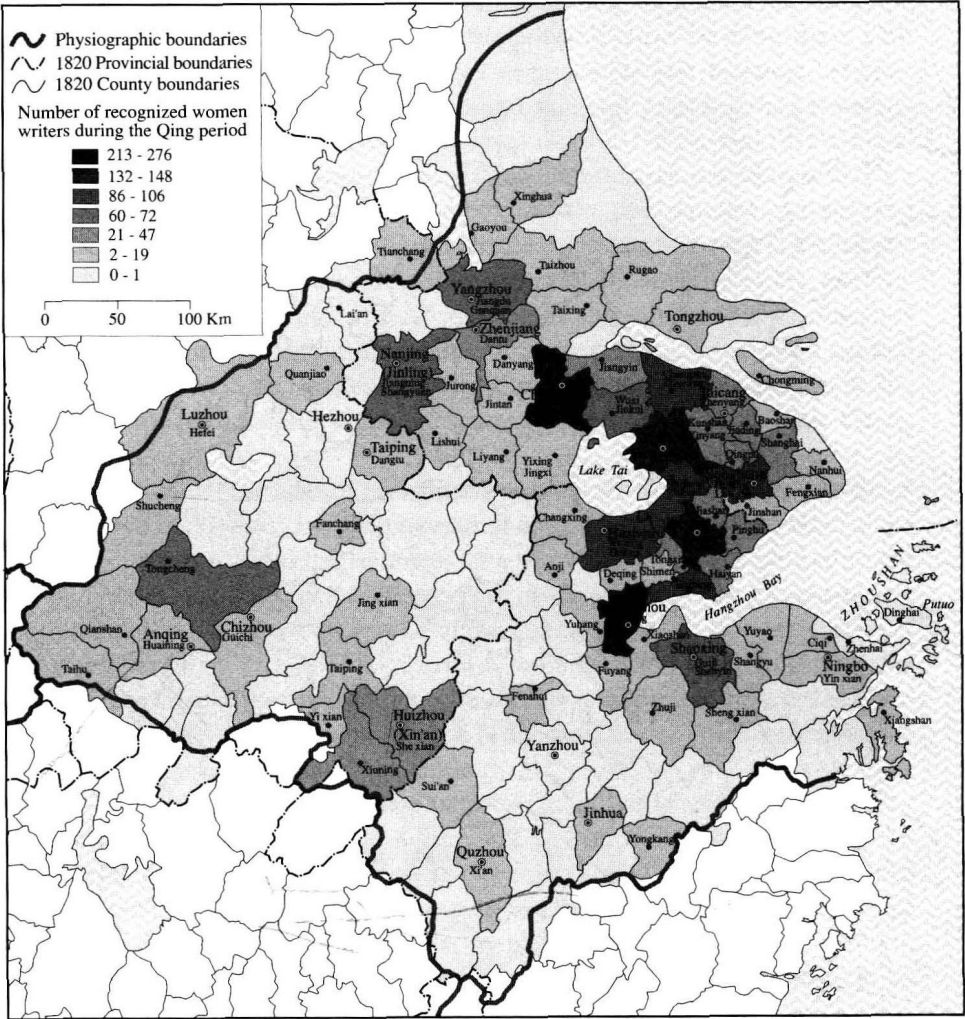
discoveries. Maureen Robertson, Dorothy Ko, Ellen Widmer, and Paul Ropp were among the first to alert me to the possibilities of learning about Chinese women in times past through their poems. Even then, however, few of us realized how much poetry by women had survived. In 1985, when Hu Wen-kai's sourcebook on women's writings was reprinted, it seemed that scholars recognized for the first time the magnitude of the corpus available to us. Hu's work first appeared in 1957, too early to claim the attention of China scholars in the United States, for whom gender did not become a category of analysis until the 1970's. But now at last historians and literary critics are studying the thousands of volumes of published books and unpublished manuscripts by women that Hu identified in his anthology, and countless others are still being discovered. As I write, a massive anthology of women's writings in English translation is being compiled under the direction of Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy.

Despite the abundance of women's writing, these works raise particular problems as a source for the historian of eighteenth-century China. Chinese women writers of this era were part of a tiny elite, far more highly educated than most of us today. Many lived lives of privilege that few of us can imagine, separated as they were by leisure and learning from the other 99.9 percent of women in the late empire. Moreover, more than 70 percent of them came from one small region on China's central coast—the region displayed in Maps 1 and 2. As a window on the world of "Chinese women," then, women's writing itself leaves something to be desired.

That is why this book takes an eclectic approach to sources and to questions about gender in Chinese history. I rely on women's own writings to correct the distortions inherent in the male gaze and to see how women themselves articulate value and meaning in a society dominated by Confucian norms. At the same time, while placing women at the center of my analysis, I have also located them in the context of the High Qing era. Women's roles and gender relations were part of a process of historical production involving state policies, marriage and labor markets, scholarly tastes, and aesthetic sensibilities unique to the eighteenth century. Complex state societies construct tax systems, welfare plans, labor legislation, and warfare strategies that directly affect household composition and the division of labor, the hierarchy of decision making and accountability within the household, the distribution of resources by sex/gender, and the value assigned to the work, reproductive as well as productive, of males and females. The late imperial Chinese state was no exception, and documentation about China's imperial government is second to none in the world. Not surprisingly, the writings of High Qing policy makers yield much evidence about gender relations.⁵



Map 1. China's physiographic macroregions, with the Lower Yangzi region highlighted. From Skinner 1985: 273. Reprinted with permission from the Association for Asian Studies, Inc.



Map 2. Distribution of women writers in the Lower Yangzi macroregion in Qing times. County-level boundaries are here reconstructed as of 1820, with natural features and city locations taken from Tan 1982. Data are drawn from Hu Wenkai 1985 (see Appendix). Map design by G. William Skinner, Geographic Information Systems work by Jian Dai, computer cartography by Chessy Si.

But policies, markets, tastes, and sensibilities were also profoundly affected by women in High Qing times. Only by making our sources talk to one another and by placing women at the center of historical analysis can we study gender and culture in the High Qing era. More than a new understanding of China's long eighteenth century is at stake here. Placing women at the center of any historical inquiry calls into question our conventional models of periodization. Understanding women's place in the High Qing era invites us to consider gender relations in the periods that precede and follow the High Qing—the late Ming era and the late nineteenth century—and to ask how unique the High Qing era really was.

Dorothy Ko's path-breaking study of women and culture in the seventeenth century shows how urbanization, commercialization, and the print culture of late Ming society brought women's voices into the historical record.⁶ Through reading and writing, elite women developed new spheres of influence, expanding the domain of kinship and friendship beyond domestic space, mastering the tools of learning that had been the domain of men, and articulating notions of talent and beauty in a dialogue with husbands, lovers, and fathers as well as with teachers, both male and female. Ko stresses that these changes in women's sphere span the seventeenth century, erasing the conventional divide that separates Ming from Qing China, that is, the Manchu conquest of 1644. In fact, as if to acknowledge the importance of the High Qing era, Ko ends her study in 1720, around the beginning of the Yongzheng emperor's reign.

Focusing, like Ko's study, on gender, my research confirms part of her conclusions about periodization, but it also raises new questions. High Qing women writers built on and expanded the domain of learning and creative expression first developed by their seventeenth-century predecessors. But important—indeed, crucial—differences separate Ko's seventeenth-century women writers from those I study in the High Qing era. Most of those differences can be traced, as Chapter 2 shows, to the Manchu conquest. To be sure, the dynastic cycle has no impact on the trajectory of women's learning in late imperial China. That trajectory appears to rise steadily from the late Ming onward, unaffected by the Ming-Qing transition. However, a focus on gender shows that the Manchu conquest marked a cultural disruption that transformed gender relations as Qing hegemony took hold. From this perspective, the history of gender relations in the Qing period marks a break from the late Ming, forcing us to reassess the importance of Manchu identity and Manchu values in the making of Qing society. In other words, for women's learning itself, the advent of the Qing dynasty barely signifies. But when we examine the role of women's learning in social and cultural life during the High Qing