Teachers of the Inner Chambers

WOMEN AND CULTURE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CHINA

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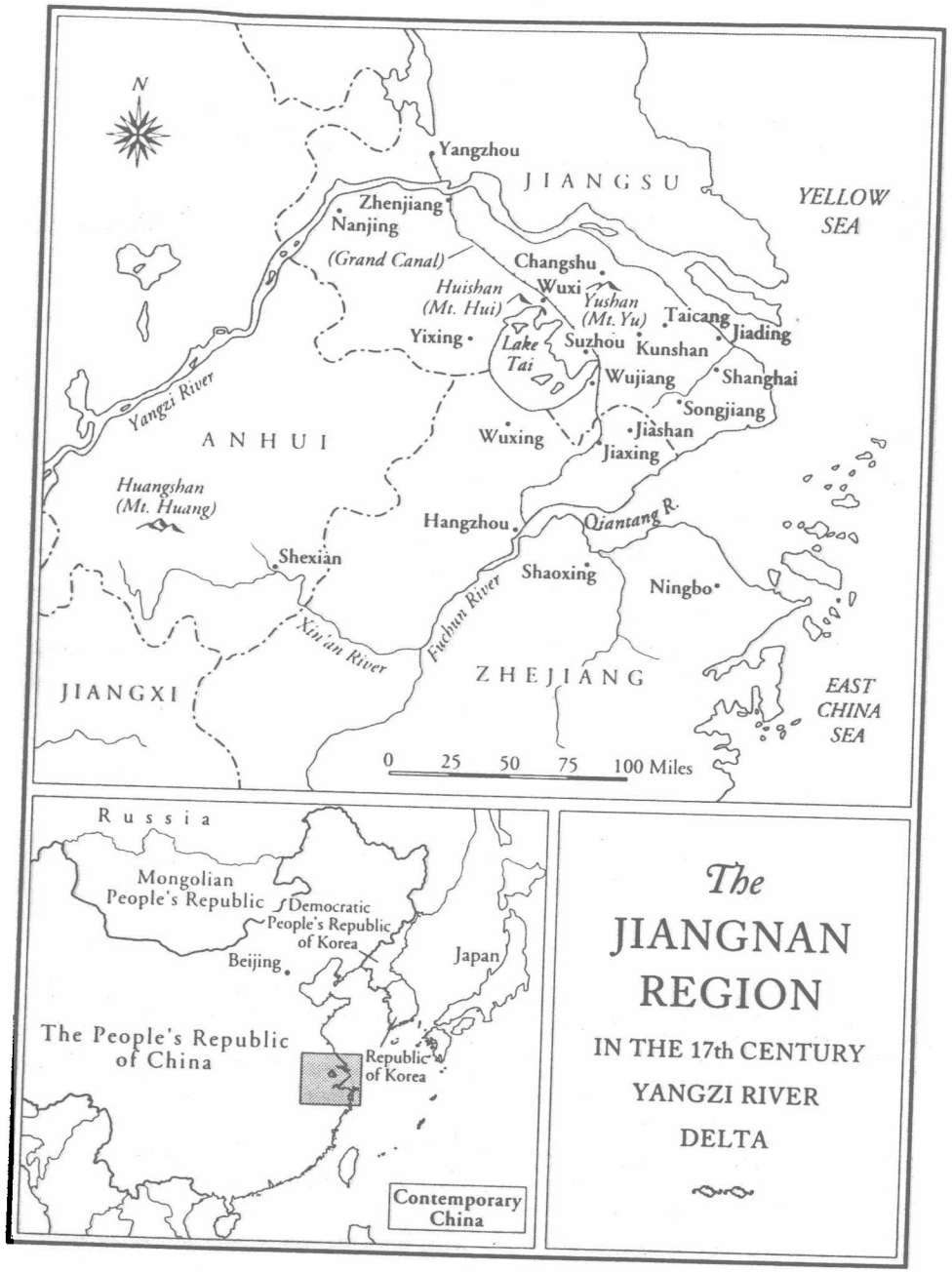
To my mother and father,
Tam Kam-fook and Ko Cheuk-luen,
who sent me to the same university
as my brother

TEACHERS OF THE INNER CHAMBERS

Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China



TEACHERS OF THE INNER CHAMBERS

Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China

SELECTED REIGN PERIODS OF THE MING AND QING DYNASTIES, 1522–1795

MING DYNASTY (1368–1644)

Jiajing period	1522–66
Longqing period	1567–72
Wanli period	1573–1620
Taichang period	1620 (eighth–twelfth month)
Tianqi period	1620–27
Chongzhen period	1628–44

MAJOR SOUTHERN MING REGIMES (1645–61)

Hongguang period	1645 (first–fifth month)
Longwu period	1645–46
Shaowu period	1646 (eleventh–twelfth month)
Yongli period	1647–61

QING DYNASTY (1644–1911)

Shunzhi period	1644–61
Kangxi period	1662–1722
Yongzheng period	1723–35
Qianlong period	1736–95

Translations of offices and official titles follow those given in Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford University Press, 1985).

Educated Chinese men and women used a variety of given names—official name (*ming*), courtesy name (*zi*), and sobriquets (*waihao*). Those that appear in this book are the ones by which that person was commonly known or with which published works were signed. Often it was the official name, but courtesy names were also used. In some cases the decision is arbitrary. Chinese and Japanese names are given in the order of family name first.

References to age have been converted to the Western count, unless otherwise noted.

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I chanced upon the worlds of Shen Yixiu, Huang Yuanjie, Liu Rushi, and other heroines in this book in 1984 when I was scanning library catalogs and bibliographies for any entries with the word *nü* (female). So little was known then about how women lived before the nineteenth century that a frequent reaction to my dissertation topic was "You don't mean that women in traditional China could read and write?!"

When I finished drafting this book in fall 1992, scores of translators were collaborating on a multivolume anthology of women poets from all dynasties, an equally monumental biographical dictionary of Ming-Qing women was under way, and an international conference on women and literature in Ming-Qing China had received generous grants from virtually all major funding agencies in Chinese studies. A new field is being written into existence.

My own intellectual transitions are just as perceptible. My dissertation was a work of social history, focusing on issues of education, kinship, social networks, and mobility. Upon returning to the U.S. academic community after a long sojourn in Japan, I became fascinated by the theoretical possibilities of cultural history. I began to question my old understanding of power, gender, and culture.

Caught between momentous transitions in the field and in my own outlook, this book is an awkward creature. To some readers it may say too little, to others too much. The message I wish to convey, however, is simple: women built intellectual and emotional communities through reading and writing. This process was as gratifying to Shen Yixiu, Shang Jinglan, and Gu Ruopu as it has been for me. It is only fitting, then, to acknowledge here my growing community of teachers, colleagues, and friends.

Harold Kahn changed my life when he told a bewildered graduate student, "Read all the theory you want, but a historian's job is to tell a good story." Lyman Van Slyke steered my search for a story with unfailing

sagacity even as I was migrating three hundred years away from his period of specialization. Susan Mann joined my trio of guardian angels as a role model in the archives as in daily life. She took off my blinders by insisting that the history of women in imperial China, however invisible, was knowable. She suggested the title of this book long before I had a book. The thought of being able to acknowledge these mentors here sustained me through blocs of writer's blues.

I remember the libraries I frequented as warm and nurturing places; their staffs have become part family. The Hoover Institution at Stanford University provided a home away from home, as did the Naikaku bunko in Tokyo and the Institute of Oriental Culture of Tokyo University. Custodians of other collections have spread feasts for the visitor's eyes, and I wish I could thank them one by one: the Harvard-Yenching Library; the Library of Congress; the Oriental Library at the University of California, Berkeley; the Tōyō bunko, Japan; the Gest Library of Princeton University. The last even gave me a grant just to visit.

If the financial assistance I received were loans, I would be in debt for the rest of my life. Fellowships from Stanford kept me free from worries throughout my graduate program. During a fruitful year in one of the world's most expensive cities, the Inter-University Center in Tokyo paid my tuition, and the College Women's Association of Japan brought me a comfortable existence. A pre-doctoral fellowship from the Social Science Research Council and American Council of Learned Societies sustained me for an extra year of archival work in Tokyo. I started drafting this book in the summer when a stipend from the State University of New York at Stony Brook allowed me to survive on take-out dinners. I finished the book with a bottle of champagne paid for by a Chancellor's Summer Grant from the University of California at San Diego. The Committee on Research of the same university cleaned up the mess by providing funds for final manuscript preparation.

Since transmigration is a blessing instead of a curse in the academic community, I cannot even begin to acknowledge the wheels of obligation I have incurred, let alone repay my dues. Too many teachers, colleagues, and friends have read drafts, written letters, and suggested readings that my only hope of relief is to reciprocate their kindness in private. I thank my early teachers for setting the wheel into motion: Harry Harding, Jr., David Abernethy, Robert Keohane, Albert Dien, Peter Duus, Jeffrey Mass, Estelle Freedman. I would not have survived five years in Tokyo if not for the scintillating company of Nakao Katsumi, Ueda Makoto, Ōki Yasushi, and members of the Chūgoku joseishi kenkyūkai. Professors Linda Grove, Yanagida Setsuko, Ono Kazuko, Kishimoto Mio, and Hamashita Takeshi opened many institutional and intellectual doors in Japan.

Many forerunners have watched over my shoulders. Susan Mann, Kathryn Bernhardt, Suzanne Cahill, and an anonymous reader read the entire manuscript. They each corrected embarrassing mistakes and offered valuable suggestions. Kang-i Sun Chang read the chapter on courtesans and suggested improvements. Chün-fang Yu readily responded to my pleas for help by sharing her expert knowledge on Buddhism. Wai-Lim Yip provided indispensable help in the reading and translation of poems. Taking responsibility for the mistakes that remain, I cannot thank these readers enough. I am also indebted to Shinno Reiko for her bibliographical assistance and to Mark Eykholt for help in preparing the Index.

Through the years, Charlotte Furth, Patricia Ebrey, Ann Waltner, Ellen Widmer, Katy Carlitz, Maureen Robertson, Judith Zeitlin, Paul Ropp, and Marilyn Young have generously shared their work and insights. My gratitude to this community of scholars is more than what footnotes can convey. Bill Rowe has been my best friend for being my most demanding critic. Each of these people has taught me a great deal. Muriel Bell of Stanford University Press kept the bad news from me for years, that my dissertation would make an unreadable book. Her constant encouragement is heartwarming. Li Huai, who provided one of her paintings for the book jacket, has my cordial thanks and admiration.

To my husband, Jim Impoco, I offer words of gratitude and a warning: Thank you for providing a window to the world outside academe and for putting up with my pathological myopia. Beware, I am starting my second book.

D.Y. K.

Introduction

GENDER AND THE POLITICS OF CHINESE HISTORY

TEACHERS of the inner chambers, the heroines of this book, occupied a world larger than the inner domestic domain. The texts of their lives and their contexts can be fully illuminated only by using "gender" as a category of historical analysis. In this Introduction, I first argue that gender becomes a relevant category in Chinese history only when the historian writes against the May Fourth legacy. I then outline my method of integrating gender with Chinese history by way of summarizing the main themes of the book. I conclude that by taking gender into account, we discover how vital seventeenth-century China was and how our familiar periodization will have to be modified.

The Victimized Woman in Old China

From its inception, the study of Chinese women's history was integral to the nationalistic program of China's modernization.[1] The first general history of Chinese women, *A New History of Women of the Divine Land* (*Shenzhou nüzi xinshi*), was written by an anti-Manchu revolutionary, Xu Tianxiao, and published a year after the dynastic order collapsed in 1912. In his attempt to incite women to be worthy members of the new citizenry, Xu cited the outstanding strength of Western heroines ranging from Queen Victoria to Madame Roland. In contrast, he lamented that "women in China lack lofty goals and distinguishing thoughts; they can boast of neither an independent will nor great enterprises."[2] Chinese women, like China itself, desperately needed to catch up with the West.

The identification of women with backwardness and dependency acquired a new urgency in the May Fourth–New Culture period (1915–27). As imperialist aggressions intensified, the victimized woman became the

symbol of the Chinese nation itself, "raped" and dominated by virile foreign powers.[3] Women's enlightenment thus became a prerequisite for the political liberation of the nation as a whole as well as for China's entrance into the modern world. In short, women's subjugation to the patriarch epitomized the savageries of old China, the roots of its present-day humiliation. The image of the victimized feudal woman was vested with such powerful nationalist sentiments that it assumed the mantle of unassailable historical truth.

So moving was the suffering of Xianglin's Wife, the protagonist in a short story called "The New Year's Sacrifice" by Lu Xun, the foremost May Fourth writer, that she remains the quintessential "traditional Chinese woman" in the minds of most Chinese. Xianglin's Wife, a widow, was sold by her mother-in-law for re-marriage. After her second husband also died and their only son was devoured by a wolf, she returned to her former master to serve as a maid. Stigmatized as impure, Xianglin's Wife was barred from preparing food for the New Year's sacrifice. She eventually went insane and collapsed on the street.[4] All the traits of the victimized woman are found in Xianglin's Wife: she is sold as a commodity, called by her husband's name, has no identity of her own, and worst of all, is so steeped in the ideology of her oppressor that she blames her misfortunes on herself.

The literary portrait of victimized women was reinforced by documentary evidence presented in the most widely read history of Chinese women, first published in 1928. In *A History of the Lives of Chinese Women* (*Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi*), Chen Dongyuan thus described his thesis: "From the beginning of history, our women have been the wretched ones." Chen clearly stated his reason for undertaking the work: "I merely want to elucidate how the concept of 'superior man–inferior woman' [*nanzun nübei*] emerged, how the destruction of women was intensified, and how the weight of history is still crushing their backs today." He continued, "I now light a torch to shine upon this monstrous burden, so that all can see in clear relief how monstrous our 3,000-year history has been, and then we would know the shape of the new life to come."[5] To Chen, women's history was worth writing if, and only if, it led to their emancipation from the yoke of China's feudal past.

In contemporary China, as in the West, impressions of Chinese women before the twentieth century are still shaped by the concerns, values, and lexicon of such writers as Lu Xun and Chen Dongyuan. The May Fourth image of the miserable traditional woman was reinforced by the political agenda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): to claim credit for the "liberation" of women, the CCP and its sympathizers perpetuated the stark view of China's past as a perennial dark age for women.[6]

This a priori assumption of woman as victim has found ready supporters among Western readers. Chandra Mohanty argues that the prevalent construction of Third World women as victims is part of an ethnocentric feminist discourse that privileges Western women as "secular, liberated and in control of their own lives." Mohanty also points out that this discourse rests on the shaky assumptions of homogeneity of women across cultures, the universality of patriarchy, and a dichotomy between tradition and modernity.[7] In the case of China, Western feminist scholarship is a mere accomplice to more persuasive Chinese nationalist concerns.

So powerful is this coalescence of Western and Chinese discourses that even Chinese scholars critical of the Orientalist lapses of Western writers are just as committed to the view of Chinese women's history as "a history of enslavement." For example, the highly articulate scholar Du Fangqin repeated the May Fourth rhetoric almost verbatim in the conclusion to her recent book: "Political authority, clan authority, husband's authority, religious authority—these four thick ropes bound up the minds and bodies of Chinese women. They bound them up so tightly that the ghosts [of these patriarchal authorities] are still hovering around today." The passionate phrase "four thick ropes" derives from Mao Zedong's "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan" of 1927.[8]

In short, the invention of an ahistorical "Chinese tradition" that is feudal, patriarchal, and oppressive was the result of a rare confluence of three divergent ideological and political traditions—the May Fourth–New Culture movement, the Communist revolution, and Western feminist scholarship. Although these traditions envision vastly different forms for modernity and the place of women in it, they concur in their indignation over the cloistered, crippled, and subservient existence of women in old China.

With the demise of Maoist radicalism in 1976, scholars in China and the West began to question the success of the socialist revolution in elevating women to an equal economic and psychological footing with men.[9] This revisionism regarding contemporary women, however, made the entrenched image of women in perpetual bondage even harder to resist. Since "new China" appears to be littered with "feudal remnants," the May Fourth legacy acquires renewed relevance. Writers continue to speak of "patriarchy in traditional China" as if both "patriarchy" and "traditional China" were monolithic, unchanging entities.[10]

It is my contention that the deep-seated image of the victimized "feudal" women has arisen in part from an analytical confusion that mistakes normative prescriptions for experienced realities, a confusion exacerbated by a lack of historical studies that examine women's own views of their worlds. My disagreement with the May Fourth formulations is not so

much that they are not "true," but that May Fourth iconoclasm is itself a political and ideological construct that tells us more about the definition of twentieth-century Chinese modernity than the nature of "traditional society." Although not without its grain of truth, the overwhelming popularity of the image of victimized women has obscured the dynamics not only of relationships between men and women but also of the functioning of Chinese society as a whole. To dispel the ahistorical bias and revise the image, historical studies of Chinese women must take greater account of specific periods and locales, as well as of the different social and class backgrounds of the women in question. Above all, women's history must be more deeply anchored in general Chinese history.

Only with this "bifocal" historical perspective can we come to understand that neither the "woman as victim" hypothesis nor its "woman as agent" antithesis can sufficiently convey the range of constraints and opportunities that women in seventeenth-century China faced.[11] Both the restrictions and the freedoms were most clearly manifested among a privileged group of educated women from the most urbanized region of the empire, the "teachers of the inner chambers." When the term first appeared in seventeenth-century China, it referred to a class of itinerant female teachers. In this book, I give it a more general and figurative usage. All the women who appear in this book, whether wives, daughters, or widows, taught each other about the vicissitudes of life through their writings. By transmitting a literate women's culture across generations, they effectively transcended the inner chambers temporally, just as the itinerant teachers defied the same boundaries spatially. Although the lives, thoughts, and circumstances of these poets, teachers, artists, writers, and readers may not have been shared by the majority of the population, they are most instructive to us for the way they highlight the possibilities for fulfillment and a meaningful existence even within the confines the Confucian system imposed upon women. Thus this book examines the lives of these women while asking them to instruct us on the historical time and space they inhabited.

As such, this book focuses narrowly on women not to highlight their isolation but to seek their reintegration into Chinese history. My twin concerns—women's history and the history of seventeenth-century China—are analytically inseparable. Born out of a curiosity about how women actually lived, this book in the end proposes a new way to conceptualize China's past. This reconception of history rests on the premise that by understanding how women lived, we better grasp the dynamics of gender relations; by comprehending gender relations, we gain a more realistic and complete knowledge of the values of Chinese culture, the functioning of its society, and the nature of historical changes.

This integration of gender and Chinese history entails the use of terminologies outside the established nomenclature of social historians of imperial China. Hence it is best to begin by outlining my idiosyncratic and eclectic approach by discussing the key concepts that structure this book: gender, class, women's culture, communities of women, Confucian tradition.

Working Definitions: Gender and Class

The most important concepts for my argument are the differences between gender and sex and the intersections between gender and class. The concept of gender is central to both pairs. According to the *Women's Studies Encyclopedia*, "gender is a cultural construct: the distinction in roles, behaviors, and mental and emotional characteristics between females and males developed by a society." As such, "gender" is conceptually distinct from "sex," although the two have often been used interchangeably: "Sex is a term that encompasses the morphological and physiological differences on the basis of which humans (and other life forms) are categorized as male and female. It should be used only in relation to characteristics and behaviors that arise directly from biological differences between men and women."[12] Although sexuality is an important subject of historical inquiry, this book is primarily concerned with gender, especially the female gender, as a cultural construct.

In the course of establishing gender as a category of historical analysis, Joan Scott has furnished a more precise definition: "The core of the definition rests on an integral connection between two propositions: gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power." She then further delineates the first proposition into four elements: symbolic representations, normative concepts, social institutions, and subjective identity.[13] My goal is to elucidate the relationships between the last three of these. In particular, I emphasize normative concepts of gender gleaned from the Confucian classics and precepts, the key roles played by such social institutions as kinship and education in the construction of gender, and the subjective gender identities of seventeenth-century elite women as revealed in their own writings.

By highlighting in her second proposition the connections between gender and power as well as how they construct each other, Scott has called attention to the integral links between gender and other formulations of equality and hierarchy. This notion of connectedness between gender and politics is particularly relevant to China, where the husband-wife bond had served as a metaphor for ruler-subject ties and a model for

all political authority since the Warring States period (fifth century to 221 B.C.).[14] In other words, we cannot conceive of the history of gender in isolation from political history, and vice versa. In this book, I speak of one aspect of this connectedness as the intersection between gender and class. My usage of "class" refers loosely to occupational groups and social stations differentiated by access to wealth, political power, cultural capital, and subjective perceptions and does not connote the Marxist meaning of economic determination.

Gender and class constituted the two primary axes against which each individual Chinese woman was to be defined in society. The Confucian dictum "Thrice Following" (*sancong*, often rendered "Three Obediences") represents an attempt to signify a woman by the occupational "class" of the paterfamilias in each stage of her life cycle: father, husband, son. Together with the admonition to demarcate the inner from the outer, which I analyze below in terms of a doctrine of separate spheres, Thrice Following is one of the twin pillars of Confucian gender ethics.

The meaning of Thrice Following is explicated in the *Book of Rites*, part of the classical canon. As translated by James Legge: "The woman follows (and obeys) the man:—in her youth, she follows her father and elder brother; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband is dead, she follows her son."[15] The same demands were reiterated in some of the most popular books of precepts, including *Instructions for the Inner Chambers* (*Neixun*), attributed to the Ming empress Renxiaowen, and Lü Kun's *Exemplars in the Female Quarters* (*Guifan*).[16] As insinuated by Legge's use of both "follows" and "obeys," however, the exact meaning of *cong*, or the nature of female submission prescribed in the idealized norms, is by no means clear-cut.

Twentieth-century scholars have often interpreted *cong* as unconditional obedience of the wife to the whims of the husband and bemoaned her "total dependence on him bodily and psychologically."[17] Whatever the philological origins of the word or the intent of Confucius, I argue that this interpretation oversimplifies the workings of gender relations and the Confucian ethical system, which I will refer to as the gender system. This distortion conveys the impression that the Chinese gender system was built upon coercion and brute oppression, which, in my view, ascribes to it at once too much and too little power. The strength and resilience of the gender system—as it unfolded in history, not on the pages of codes of conduct—should be attributed to the considerable range of flexibilities that women from various classes, regions, and age groups enjoyed in practice. These flexibilities, in turn, ensued from a number of built-in tensions and contradictions in the gender system, the most important of which is that between gender and class.

My contention is that in practice *sancong* deprived a woman of her legal and formal social identity but not her individual personality or subjectivity.[18] For this reason, I prefer the translation Thrice Following to Three Obediences. In its claims of universal applicability to women from all families and age groups, the dictum opened up the conceptual possibility of identifying women by their shared gender, or women-as-same. At the same time, by defining women according to the social station of their paterfamilias, the dictum was predicated on a divisive element, or women-as-different. This inherent contradiction accorded women a range of freedoms within their own limited spheres, but these spheres were fragmented and often demarcated by the class of their male kin. As a result, even the most mobile and articulate women in the seventeenth century had no institutional and conceptual means to forge a broadly based united front that could launch systematic and fundamental attacks on the gender system.

In her study of Northern Song (960–1126) palace women, Priscilla Ching Chung makes an astute observation on the practical meaning of Thrice Following:

> Since Chinese law also confers upon a woman the same status held by her husband, it is more valuable to discuss women in terms of different social and economic classes. Albert O'Hara has suggested dividing women in China into four classes: slaves and laboring women, wives of farmers and merchants, wives of scholars and officials, and wives of nobles and rulers. Within each class responsibilities and privileges of women differed. It is, therefore, important to understand that subservience of women to men did not mean total subordination of all women to all men but the subordination of specific women to specific men within their own class, and only in terms of personal and family relationships.[19]

In other words, although it is valid to speak of an undifferentiated block of "Chinese women" on a certain normative level, any historical study of women and gender should be class-, locale-, and age-specific.

As this study of the wives and daughters of scholar-official families in seventeenth-century Jiangnan will show, this double formulation of gender and class accounts for the perpetuation of the gender system during a time of traumatic socioeconomic transition. These educated women did not support the gender system because they were whipped into submission to their fathers, husbands, and sons, as is often implied in May Fourth literature.

New Paradigms of Chinese Women's History

This book seeks to revise the May Fourth view of history, which construed the oppression of women as the most glaring failing of China's feudal patriarchal past. The pervasiveness of this formulation has dis-

torted not only women's history but also the very nature of pre-nineteenth-century Chinese society. The widely shared assumption of universal oppression of women in traditional China logically leads one to expect these women to rebel or escape whenever they could. Hence the search for signs of "resistance" and, when that fails—when one finds instead women's seemingly voluntary compliance—allusions to the power of the Confucian tradition to "silence" women. These inquiries are faulty from the start, for they are predicated on a conception of society and gender relations that is overly mechanistic and too neatly dichotomous—man on top of woman; state over society. When scholars focused on the hoped-for imminent collapse of the system that would set women free, what I consider to be the crucial question—How did the gender system manage to function so well for so long?—was never asked, let alone answered.

In this book, I attempt to explain both the functioning and the reproduction of the gender system by focusing on women's vested interests in it. By implicating women as actors maneuvering to further their perceived interests from within the system, I see them as architects of concrete gender relations, the building blocks from which the overarching gender system was constructed. Instead of outright resistance or silencing, I describe processes of contestation and negotiation, whose meaning is ambivalent not only to us in hindsight but also to men and women at the time.

Above all, in lieu of the May Fourth dichotomous model of an oppressive patriarchy, I propose a dynamic tripartite model that construes the lives of Chinese women as the summation of three levels of shifting realities: theory or ideal norms, practice, and self-perceptions. As the chapters that follow will show, these three levels were at times in harmony and at other times at odds; in some instances they were separated by formidable gulfs, and in other cases their overlapping was seamless. Whereas the May Fourth model derived largely from static description of ideal norms, we are compelled to reconstruct the history of women and Chinese society from the gulfs and the overlappings between these three elements, transitory territories that are by nature shifting and multifarious in meaning.

The specific interplay between these three constituents of a woman's life varied not only with time but also with the social and geographical locales of the woman concerned. For the elite women from the Jiangnan urban centers that form the bulk of this study, through didactic literature and dictums transmitted orally, they were taught the ideal norms they were supposed to embrace—the Thrice Following and its corollary, the Four Virtues (*side*). In everyday life, most adhered to these dictums nominally, being bound by law and social custom to lead a domestically centered life. Although women could not rewrite the rules that structured their lives, they were extremely creative in crafting a space from within the prevailing gender system that gave them meaning, solace, and dignity. Their impressive array of tactics, as we will see, ranges from reinterpreting the dicta through writing, revamping the meaning of such dicta in practice, to boring through the cracks between the morally laudable and the permissible both in writing and in practice.

In so doing, these women opened up arenas of freedom for themselves without directly challenging the ideal norms promulgated by the official ideology. Thus in their self-representations—gleaned from poetry and other genres of writing—there is a conspicuous absence of overt attacks on the system. Indeed, the most educated members of the female population were inclined more to celebrate their role as guardians of Confucian morality than to repudiate it. In this case, the ideal norms prescribed by the official ideology and women's self-perceptions are in apparent agreement. This agreement, however, masks the complex processes of negotiation and the variegated mosaic of women's everyday life, which often defied the official norms.

This book is my attempt to reconstruct this mosaic, the context in which educated women from seventeenth-century China could speak to us about their frustrations, pleasures, and aspirations. In repudiating the simplistic May Fourth construction of the victimized women in old China, my intention is not to defend patriarchy or write an apology for the Confucian tradition. Rather, I insist that a realistic understanding of the strength and longevity of the Confucian gender system serves the agendas of the historian, the revolutionary, and women equally well.

Indeed, the distinction between "what should be" and "what is" is a key to understanding the Janus-faced nature of seventeenth-century Chinese society, which appears to be the best of times and the worst of times for women. If legal statutes and moral instruction books were accurate guides, the late Ming (1573–1644) and early Qing (1644–1722) periods would indeed be a dark age of tightening restrictions. Whereas elite women enjoyed a degree of inheritance rights and were relatively free to remarry during the Song dynasty (960–1279), by the seventeenth century they had lost their property rights and were subjected to increasingly strict sexual mores, most notably the cult of chastity.[20] Moreover, massive lists of chaste women in local gazetteers suggest that both elite and commoner women subscribed to the chastity cult.[21] Scholars have described these changes in terms of a "decline in the status of women," a decline allegedly caused by a hardening of Neo-Confucian philosophy and by the development of a market economy that commoditized women.[22]

Even a cursory look at descriptions of seventeenth-century urban life in local histories, private writings, and fiction suggests a contrasting picture of the vitality of women's domestic and social lives, as well as the degree of

informal power and social freedom they apparently enjoyed. For example, Ming and Qing novels and dramas show that housewives possessed the "power of the key" to the household bursary.[23] The innumerable women's biographies and eulogies in local gazetteers and literati writings supply ample evidence of erudite scholars, able managers, avid travelers, and imposing personalities. Most relevant to our purposes, however, is a large body of writings by educated women—mostly poetry, but also letters, essays, and drama. Not only are these writings the best indicators of rising female literacy rates, but they also convey a sense of the richness of women's intellectual and social worlds.[24] They are the primary materials on which this book is based, supplemented by works of their male relatives.

The gaps between norms and actual behavior on the one hand and between formal and informal power on the other suggest that we need to pay as much attention to the everyday lives and self-perceptions of women as to overarching structures of domination.[25] What this calls for, above all, is a concept of power that focuses not on static structures or institutions but on the dynamic processes through which power is exercised. Even in imperial China—often regarded as a classic example of so-called patriarchy—there was much fluidity and possibilities for individuals to constitute themselves in everyday practice.

Power Without the King: Realities of the Patriarchal Family

The theories of power developed by French scholars Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu can help us conceptualize the unofficial power that Chinese women enjoyed. Foucault cautioned that power is not "something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away." Instead, "power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations." Rather than ask "who has power" and "who is deprived of it," he argued, the historian of sexuality should look for changing distributions of power and appropriations of knowledge, processes he called "matrices of transformations."[26]

Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu has warned that anthropologists steeped in structuralism are blind to the vast domain of "practical kinship" in which men and women operate. They are thus condemned to taking the genealogy-based "official kinship" to be the only reality. To chart the relationships of practical kinship, Bourdieu has distinguished between "official power" that men monopolize and "dominated power" that women often wield, a circumscribed power by proxy that is nonetheless real. "Even when women do wield the real power," he wrote, "as is often the case in matrimonial matters, they can exercise it fully only on condition that they leave the appearance of power, that is, its official manifestation, to the men."[27] Here, too, the appearance of kinship hierarchy and formal structures of power mask the realities of the exercise of power.

Foucault's notion of "power without the king" and Bourdieu's "dominated power" suggest that even in a society as thoroughly patriarchal as China, kinship systems and family relations may not have been the workings of men alone. The nature and degree of power that a woman could exercise depended not only on her social position and the task at hand but also on such factors as her personal skills and her position in the life cycle. This vision of kinship and power relations allows the historian to study women's lives as they themselves saw them without having to judge at the outset whether certain institutions or practices are "oppressive." Questions of judgment are important, but they can be broached only on the basis of concrete knowledge of how men and women lived, how they viewed their lives, as well as the manifold ways in which prevailing ideologies impinged upon their lives and perceptions. For seventeenth-century China, the present state of our knowledge on such matters is pitifully incomplete.

A realistic understanding of gender and power relations has to begin with the family, the basic social universe of Chinese men and women. In a historical overview, Patricia Ebrey discusses three sets of ideas and practices that characterized the early development of the Chinese family: patrilineality, filial piety, and patriarchy. These attributes, firmly established by Song times, showed remarkable resilience through time and universality across class and regional boundaries.[28] The particular expressions of patrilineality, filial piety, and patriarchy, however, were historical occurrences that varied with time, place, and the social background of the men and women concerned.

The domestic lives of gentry men and women studied in this book suggest that even if the assumptions of patriarchy were not being challenged outright in the seventeenth century, in practice they were being constantly mitigated. Although men still claimed legal rights over family property and fathers enjoyed authority over women and children, the housewife as de facto household manager, mother, and educator of children had ample opportunities to influence family affairs. In the context of everyday life, women were hardly outsiders to the family system.

More damaging to the myth of an omnipotent patriarchy was the growing availability and acceptance of women's education, which, by the seventeenth century, created a visible cohort of gentrywomen with a literary and classical education. Their very existence, and the fact that education increased their cachet as wives, called into question the foundation of patriarchal values—women as inferior moral and intellectual beings.

Whereas Joanna Handlin-Smith has examined the philosophical challenge posed by educated women to Confucian thinkers like Lü Kun (1536–1613), in this book I focus on the changes in family life and definitions of domesticity.[29] This is evident in the rising incidence of companionate marriage, changing definitions of womanhood, and the increasing vigor with which women redrew or trespassed the boundaries between the domestic and public spheres.

The Inner and Outer: Negotiated Boundaries

As mentioned above, Confucian gender ethics was founded on the twin pillars of Thrice Following and the doctrine of separate spheres (man : outer / woman : inner). Chinese society has often been said to thrive on a clear demarcation between domestic and public spheres, with women confined to the former and men controlling the latter. To the extent that the Chinese family functioned on a gender-based division of labor, with women barred from taking the civil service examination and hence from bureaucratic appointments, there is truth to this statement. Yet the formula of separation is more prescriptive of an ideal norm than descriptive of the realities of gender interactions in the seventeenth century.

This distinction has to be stressed in light of two widely held misconceptions. First is the image of the cloistered woman, crippled by bound feet and imprisoned in her inner chambers. In this book, I show that despite moral precepts admonishing women to stay at home, even gentrywomen traveled a great deal, on trips ranging from long-distance journeys accompanying their husbands on official appointments to excursions for pleasure in the company of other women. Second, and more important, the juxtaposition of a female domestic sphere with a male political sphere implies that the family is immune to politics, an erroneous assumption that anyone who has lived with a Chinese family would dismiss. The juxtaposition is misleading because it ignores the crucial interaction between family and state on the one hand, and between men and women, both inside and outside the family, on the other.

The validity of separate spheres as an analytical tool has long been questioned by scholars outside sinology. In an influential essay published in 1979, feminist historian Joan Kelly argued that women's history should be approached in relational terms and with a "doubled vision." Arguing that a "woman's place is not a separate sphere or domain of existence but a position within social existence generally," Kelly stressed that relegating "men and women" to neatly defined spheres often reflects the wishes of the patriarch more than it does social reality.[30]

Social scientists, notably Pierre Bourdieu, have proposed new theoretical constructs that break down the dichotomy of domestic versus public spheres. Bourdieu's articulation of concepts of "habitus" and "embodiment" attributes the reproduction of distinctions in society at large, especially that of male/female, to the structuring of body movements and domestic spatial arrangements. Thus linking social hierarchies with private and domestic dispositions, the concept of habitus transcends "the usual antinomies . . . of determinism and freedom . . . or the individual and society."[31] In a related attempt to construct a unitary theoretical vision, anthropologists Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako have taken the entire ethnographic tradition to task for treating kinship and gender as distinct domains. No historian would disagree with their argument that binaries such as "domestic/public," "nature/culture," and "reproduction/production" are inadequate because they assume an opposition as a historical given instead of explaining its existence in the first place.[32]

Following the insights of these scholars, the organizational scheme of this book rests on a continuum of inner (*nei*) and outer (*wai*) domains as fields of action that women inhabited. Although often rendered in English as "domestic" and "public," "inner" and "outer" in their Chinese contexts are always relative and relational terms. The inner/outer construct does not demarcate mutually exclusive social and symbolic spaces; instead, the two define and constitute each other according to shifting contexts and perspectives. In the eyes of the Qing monarchy, for example, the family is the very site where public morality can be exemplified. Hence when I use the term *public* in this book, I do not mean a realm that excludes the domestic; rather, I am referring to relationships and writings in the public eye.

Building on the Chinese concept of an inner-outer continuum, I situate the lives of women studied in this book in a series of nested circles originating in the private domain of the inner chambers and extending to the social realms of kinship, neighborhood, and to the heart of the so-called public spheres of print culture, litigation, and loyalist activities. Women's social lives in these various fields of action constitute the two major themes of the book. First, I investigate the forging and emotional content of their friendship ties with other women. Second, I portray women's interactions with the men in their life—father, husband, sons, relatives, teachers, authors, and, in the case of courtesans, clients and lovers.

These two kinds of intimacies constituted the weft and warp of a woman's emotive, intellectual, and religious lives. The rich tradition that seventeenth-century literate women created and celebrated was largely separate from the world of men, although it was by no means separatist. In fact, while shared concerns, routines, rituals, and emotions distinguished the female world from the male, the very construction of such routines and