

# **Gender and Canonicity: Ming-Qing Women Poets in the Eyes of the Male Literati**

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This paper touches on the problem of gender and canon-formation in the context of the Ming-Qing literati culture, and especially on how the literati's view of women brought about the changing status of the canon. In recent years the "canon" of literature has become a focus of literary debate in America, largely due to the influence of multiculturalism. But of course the idea of canon is a very old one: it is as old as literature itself. Since ancient times readers of all cultures have been studying the so-called "great works" in literature, although it was only in recent years that people began to consciously ask questions about the canon. Such questions include, for example, what makes literature great? What makes great literature worth reading? What determines our judgment of what is "aesthetic"? What are the main differences between great works and minor works? Should the canon represent universal experiences, or experiences of certain groups of people? Is "difference" the main reason for women's exclusion from the literary canon?

Many of these questions have been raised by feminist critics, who prefer to view canonicity as a political and social choice rather than as purely aesthetic judgment.<sup>1</sup> In my study of gender and canonicity in Ming-Qing literature, I was naturally inspired by these views. But I have also come to realize that the basic idea and the intention associated with the process of canon-formation in Ming-Qing China are quite unique, such that they cannot be fully explained by modern feminist criticism. Indeed, the question of gender and canonicity is more complex than it appears. And I think culture is still at the center of such complexity. Do people think about such questions differently when their cultural experiences are different? How do distinct cultures shape ideas differently about the relationship between men and women? In what way do people in other cultures talk about these issues differently? To answer these questions, we must always look at the full range of the cultural implications in each case.

Let me turn to the example of the Ming-Qing literati culture for emphasis. From years of research in this area, I have found that one of the most distinctive phenomena of this culture is the male literati's overwhelming support of contemporary women poets.<sup>2</sup> These men greatly admired the talent of women, and their keen interest in reading, editing, compiling and evaluating the poetry of women was unprecedented. Starting with the late Ming (i.e., late 16th century), many literati made their life-long careers as vigorous supporters of women's publishing, advocating the public influence of female talents, and ensuring writing women's "right" to literary fame. It can be said that theirs is a special kind of "literati culture" in which the literary men, with their idealized notion of the feminine, helped create China's first episode of "women's studies," or studies by men as inspired by the writings and lives of women. Central to this "women's studies" was the notion of canonicity in literature, because these men actively pursued new ways to bring the marginalized women to the canonical position. In particular, they attempted to revise critical techniques and priorities in literary judgment and, in many cases, created new literary criteria by which women's writings could be reread.

As I have written elsewhere, numerous male editors and compilers of the Ming-Qing period undertook the task of canonizing women's writings by comparing their anthologies of women poets to the classical canon, the *Shijing* 詩經, and by repeatedly emphasizing that the authors of many *Shijing* poems were women.<sup>3</sup> This strategy of linking literary works to the *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry), the earliest poetic anthology which is reputed to have been compiled by Confucius, has had a long legacy in the Chinese commentary tradition. Ever since the Han scholar Wang Yi 王逸 (fl. 110-120) began to place Qu Yuan's 屈原 *Li Sao* 離騷 (4th century BCE) in the tradition of the *Shijing*, Chinese poets and commentators throughout the dynasties consistently employed the same method of canonization—that is, using early Confucian classics like the *Shijing* as common signposts for further expansion of the canon.<sup>4</sup> As Wendell Harris says in his article on canonicity, "all interpretation of texts depends on a community's sharing interpretive strategies."<sup>5</sup> The Ming-Qing literati's strategy in canonizing women writers was precisely to bring women's works into the mainstream of the interpretive community. These literati not only used the *Shijing* as a source of canonical authority but also looked up to Qu Yuan's *Li Sao* as a model for women's works. For example, the *Female Sao* (Nüsaó 女騷), an anthology of women's poetry compiled by Qu Juesheng 蘧覺生 in 1618, reflected the very philosophy of this approach. In his preface to the *Nüsaó*, the male literatus Zhao Shiyong 趙時用 calls attention to the significance of "change" (*bian* 變) in the evolution of literature, claiming that poetic forms have changed greatly from the *feng* 風 and *ya* 雅 of the *Shijing*—

no doubt with the implication that the poetic canon should be expanded to include a much wider spectrum of styles and works, including those by women. Such a strategy of canonization certainly recalls Liu Xie's 劉勰 treatment of the *Li Sao*. In his attempt to canonize Qu Yuan, the Six Dynasties critic Liu Xie claims, in his *Wenxin Diaolong* 文心雕龍, that his goal is not only to demonstrate how the literary mind "has its origin in the *dao*, takes the sage as its model, [and] finds the main forms in the Classics. . .," but also to "show changes in the *Sao*."<sup>6</sup> Clearly Liu Xie found in *Li Sao*, and in the entire collection of the *Chuci* 楚辭, the awakening of a new spirit that helped create new aesthetic criteria in literature.

The purpose of this paper, however, is not to continue discussing how Ming-Qing men attempted to canonize women through the compilation of poetry anthologies, a topic which I have already explored extensively in a previous article, but rather to ask some new questions: Why did Ming-Qing literati begin to show such interest in women's writings? Did their enchantment with women's works come from a desire to redefine themselves or to construct a new verbal world? Moreover, I propose to explore how Ming-Qing men developed their "women's studies" in view of their literati (*wenren* 文人) culture, and whether their support of women might well have been part of a long-repressed desire on the part of the traditional Chinese *wenren*. Examining the relationship between Ming-Qing literati and women poets, I also hope to discover if the questions of gender and canon can be used as a bifocal lens to help focus the study of Ming-Qing literature and culture as a whole.

First, there was a new development in Ming-Qing literati culture which engendered a rather unique attitude toward life and society in general: the literati, with their growing dissatisfaction and contempt for the examination system (and particularly their deep disdain for the eight-legged essay required in the examinations),<sup>7</sup> had gradually developed a sense of withdrawal from the conventional world of political involvement. Confronting the undesirable world of officialdom, many unhappy literati—though not necessarily humbled by their destitution—had begun to feel themselves somewhat "marginalized."<sup>8</sup> Ironically it was these "marginalized" literati who eventually took up the responsibility of canonizing women in literature. As they began to feel more and more frustrated, these literati became independent artists and writers who constructed a self-contained world in which love, emotion, friendship, and aesthetic taste became the guiding principles of life. Prominent examples of such men include Zhang Chao 張潮 (1650-after 1707), the author of *You mengying* 幽夢影; Zou Yi 鄒漪, the compiler of *Hongjiao ji* 紅蕉集; Wang Shilu 王士祿 (1626-1673), the brother of Wang Shizhen 王士禎 (1634-1711) and editor of *Ranzhi ji* 然脂集; Zhao Shijie

趙世杰, the anthologist who published the famous *Gujin nüshi* 古今女史 in 1628; and Shi Zhenlin 史震林 (1693-ca.1779), whose *Xiqing sanji* 西青散記 provided a moving record of the woman poet He Shuangqing 賀雙卿.<sup>9</sup> All these men professed to an obsession (*pi* 癖 or *shi* 嗜) with women's lives and writings, and their enchantment with femininity in fact reinforced their sense of self-feminization. According to Shi Zhenlin, one of life's two tragedies is not being able to meet a true *jiaren* (a woman of talent and beauty); the other is not being able to find a friend who understands the worth of one's writing. This tendency to favor talented and beautiful women reminds us of the novelist Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 who, perhaps in his desire to escape the conventional world, also developed a kind of nostalgia for the aesthetic world of the feminine.<sup>10</sup> As Cao says in the opening chapter of the *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢, his book grows out of his desire to recount the "actions and motives" of a "number of females" whom he spent half a lifetime studying with his "own eyes and ears."<sup>11</sup>

It should be mentioned that the famous *Xiangyan congshu* 香艷叢書 (Miscellaneous Writings on Femininity),<sup>12</sup> though not specifically confined to works produced in the Ming-Qing era, perhaps reflects most thoroughly the aesthetic and non-pragmatic approach characteristic of this literati culture. Indeed, femininity (or *xiangyan* in Chinese) had become a significant preoccupation of Ming-Qing literati, and in their general admiration for women they especially appreciated the female talents.<sup>13</sup> These literati devoted themselves to collecting women's works, both ancient and contemporary. By their painstaking reconstructions, they not only helped contemporary women to gain literary fame but also rescued from historical obscurity those female figures whose lives had thus far remained hidden from history because previous literary historians rarely recognized their existence. Thus, the very frustration which caused them to feel "marginalized," the very obsession which led them into the world of the feminine and self-feminization, the very energy which made it possible for them to lead lives of self-contentment—all these same forces they now put at the disposal of women poets and their causes. In the preface to his anthology of women's poetry *Hongjiao ji*, Zou Yi quite aptly describes this combination of forces:

I have been a man of many regrets, and I love to indulge myself in the works of women. I've traveled to Wu and Yue, trying to bring together [as many poems by women as possible] . . .<sup>14</sup>

僕本恨人，癖耽奩製，薄遊吳越，加意  
網羅 .....

There can be no doubt that in their enthusiastic support of women, Ming-Qing literati also viewed the situation of marginalized female talent as a reminder of their own marginality. Above all, they sympathized greatly with these talented women for their lack of recognition in literature. In fact, it was the realization that women had been largely left out of anthologies and literary histories which first prompted late Ming literati to engage in the compilation of women's anthologies. For example, Tian Yiheng 田藝衡, a pioneer in such endeavors, devoted his life to collecting women's writings mainly because of his desire to bring justice to generations of literary women. In his anthology *Shi nü shi* 詩女史 (Poetic Works of Female Scribes) published sometime during the mid-16th century, Tian Yiheng argued that it was the anthologists' fault that women's names remained so obscure in literary history, because women's literary accomplishments since antiquity was no less than men's.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Qu Juesheng, the compiler of *Nü Sao*, claimed that women's poetic works should be read and remembered forever and that their literary immortality would be like that of the Confucian "classics and edicts."<sup>16</sup> All these views reflect the desire of late Ming literati to have women's writings preserved, remembered, and canonized in the cultural memory.

By far the strongest argument these men made concerning women's works was that female poetry epitomizes the very quality of "qing" 清 (purity), a quality prerequisite of all great poetry. They believed that women were naturally endowed with this quality of "purity," whereas contemporary male poets—in their attempt to pursue stylistic effectiveness and artificiality—had gradually lost this important poetic element. Thus, Zou Yi said "the humor of the cosmic *qing shu* [the pure and the gentle] does not occur in males, but it does in females" (乾坤清淑之氣不鍾男子，而鍾女子).<sup>17</sup> And Zhong Xing 鍾惺, the famous late Ming poet and critic, urged people to open their eyes to the distinctive power of *qing* in women's poetry:

As for those great women poets—both ancient and modern—their poetry has come from true feeling and is deeply rooted in nature. They rarely imitate others, and know no petty factions. . . This is all because of their quality of *qing*. This *qing* gives rise to wisdom. . . Certainly men, despite their artistic skills [*qiao*], are far inferior to women. . .<sup>18</sup>

若乎古今名媛，則發乎情，根乎性，未嘗擬作，亦不知派...唯清故也，清則慧...男子之巧，洵不及婦人矣。

What is interesting is that by upholding *qing* as a female attribute, the late Ming literati radically revised the traditional definition of *qing*, which in the context of ancient philosophy and literature was often meant to refer to the excellence of the male gender. In ancient China, *qing* was a concept directly opposed to that of *zhuo* 濁 (murkiness)—if *qing* was thought to represent the quality of *yanggang* 陽剛 (masculine strength), then *zhuo* was used to stand for *yinrou* 陰柔 (female gentleness). The former refers to heaven and the power of time, which is forever light-giving, active, and bright; the latter symbolizes earth and the complementary, dark impulse of space. Generally *qing*, as opposed to *zhuo*, is being given a more positive value because it not only symbolizes one's outward beauty (mostly male) but also is supposed to embody the moral value of one's inner virtue. Thus, it was no accident that "*qing*" became an important criterion for evaluating people in the "pure talk" (*qingtan* 清談) vogue of the Wei-Jin Period (220-420).<sup>19</sup> The pervasiveness of this custom can be found in the book *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, where numerous examples of exemplary male figures embodying the quality of *qing* are recorded. For example, the virtuous Wang Yan 王衍 was compared to a thousand-foot high mountain cliff which is described as being "pure and towering" (*qingzhi* 清峙). The tall and handsome Ji Kang 嵇康 was praised as "pure and lofty" (*qingju* 清舉). Du Hongzhi 杜弘治, the grandson of the famous Du Yu 杜預, was lauded for his "splendid and pure" (*biaoxian qingling* 標鮮清令) demeanor.<sup>20</sup>

This notion of *qing* was of course not consciously conceived in gender terms, but it was applied mainly to men because most members of the literary and political circles of the time were male. The dominant image of *qing* can be said to be a reflection of the true spirit of the Wei-Jin aesthetics; it concerns not only the appearance of beauty itself but also its ideals. Naturally this *qing* soon made its way into the realm of literature and came to stand for an important literary style, one which was to be distinguished from the murky *zhuo*. Cao Pi 曹丕, Emperor Wen of the Wei, once said, "In literature *qi* is the dominant factor. *Qi* has its normative forms—either pure (*qing*) or murky (*zhuo*). It is not to be brought forth by force."<sup>21</sup> (文以氣爲主，氣之清濁有體，不可力強而致). Thus, like *qi* (breath) in a person, *qing* is a manifestation of a natural endowment and cannot be learned. However, it can be nurtured, provided that the individual poet's temperament is compatible with the principle of purity. To be sure, it was this style of *qing* which served as the model of poetry-

writing for many Chinese—as Liu Xie observed in his *Wenxin diaolong*, “in five-character line verse, a derived form, the most important elements are purity and beauty” (五言流調，則清麗居宗).<sup>22</sup> In his poem “In an Old Style” (“*Gufeng*” 古風), Li Bai 李白 also said, “In our own hallowed age, we have returned to antiquity. Our majestic monarch values purity and truth.”<sup>23</sup> (聖代復元古，垂衣貴清真). Indeed, for centuries, *qing* had become the enduring principle of aesthetic and moral perfection which male poets continued to look up to. Moreover, the assumption was that only canonical male figures in the past could serve as true models of *qing*.

Then, suddenly, late Ming literati like Zhong Xing and Zhao Shijie began to introduce an entirely new interpretation of the *qing* aesthetic—namely, that women’s innate qualities were more closely associated with *qing* and hence their poetic works could serve as better models for writing. As such, they represented a revolutionary shift in aesthetic and moral values. Like most of his male contemporaries, Zhong Xing based his argument upon a rereading of traditional discourse. According to the conventional interpretation, *qing* embodies both beauty and goodness—in other words, it is through *qing* that morality can be expressed in a spontaneous and elegant form. Instead, Zhong Xing claimed that the feminine quality of “naturalness” (*ziran* 自然) intimately links a woman with the essential elements of beauty and goodness, and is thus more illustrative of *qing*. Just because women’s daily experiences are closer to the “natural” state of things, he insists, female poets tend to write from true feelings that are “rooted in nature.” Just because women have no pragmatic concerns for writing poetry and are free from partisan views caused by “petty factions,” their works are bound to contain a more genuine spirit of poetry. And precisely because of their lack of social experiences, women are freer to develop their poetic imagination and powers of concentration.

However convincing the Ming-Qing literati’s argument about *qing* in women may have been, they obviously succeeded in elevating the position of female poets by stressing the “purity” of their works, which in men’s view was closer to the classical conception of *qing* and could be used to purge male poetry of its contaminated elements, such as *qiao* 巧 (artistry). In other words, this call for purification came from a strong and recognized need to chasten contemporary poetry.

The fact that male literati favored the quality of *qing* in women gave Ming-Qing female poets a particular confidence in themselves and certainly a great deal of incentive in writing poetry. Knowing that their poems would be read and appreciated, an unprecedented number of women made a career out of writing and publishing—the 3,000 or so women’s anthologies and collections produced during the Ming-Qing period are clear indications that

female writers were consciously seeking an audience. Indeed, we have evidence that Ming-Qing women enjoyed editing and publishing, and some particularly renowned professional women and artists like Huang Yuanjie 黃媛介 and others were even invited by men to write prefaces for their own publications.<sup>24</sup> Huang Yuanjie's preface to Li Yu's 李漁 *Yizhong yuan* 意中緣 (Ideal Love Matches) demonstrates how a preface by a female talent could help promote a male author's work, when female literary traits were identified as pure and lofty.<sup>25</sup>

In this connection, it is important to note that while late Ming literati became more and more absorbed in the feminine culture, many women poets began to develop a lifestyle typical of the educated male. Like male literati, these women cultivated an interest in the arts, and especially in activities that were non-pragmatic in nature—such as exchanging poems with friends (both male and female), painting and calligraphy, and traveling for leisure. In their poetry these women emphasized the spontaneous expression of feelings and deliberately refrained from a “feminine” style, which they called “*zhifen qi*” 脂粉氣. It was the famous woman anthologist Wang Duanshu 王端淑 (1621-ca. 1706) who proclaimed, “Women who cannot rid their poetry of the feminine style are those who are incapable of removing themselves from old habits”<sup>26</sup> (女人不能脫脂粉氣，自是沿習未出耳). In her evaluation of the woman poet Zhu Yingzhen 朱應禎, Wang Duanshu praised Zhu for her ability to avoid the contaminating influence of the feminine style (*zhifen qi*), and especially for her style of “superb elegance” (*xiuya* 秀雅), which reminds us of the pure style of *qing*.<sup>27</sup> Later during the Qing, the woman poet Xi Peilan 席佩蘭 also called for a natural (*ziran*) poetry based on one's “innate disposition” (*xingqing* 性情),<sup>28</sup> obviously under the influence of her teacher Yuan Mei 袁枚 who insisted on the principle of *xingling* 性靈 (spontaneous self-expression) in poetry. Likewise, a few years later, the female critic Shen Shanbao 沈善寶, in her book of criticism *Mingyuan shihua* 名媛詩話, again suggested the importance of a pure, spontaneous poetry characterized by *shenyun* 神韻 (spiritual resonance), a term which she must have borrowed from the early Qing poet Wang Shizhen.<sup>29</sup>

Looking back on the Ming-Qing male literati's and women poets' enthusiasm for a “natural” poetry rooted in *qing*, we cannot help noticing how similar their approaches were. These were serious poets and critics; they all sought to take back from nature what belonged to poetry. They all shared the burden of an attempt to purify poetry and they all believed in the power of simple language and an ideal return to the classical. Undoubtedly this was the first time in Chinese literary history that men and women shared a belief in a similar tenet in the writing of poetry. In *qing* the “marginalized” literati found



their idealized notion of the feminine, while women poets gained from it a new sense of wholeness and balance derived from the joining of the male and female perspectives. Perhaps we can say that the Ming-Qing rereading of *qing* was only part of the literati's (and women's) desire to erase the gender opposition in the traditional cultural realm. Though out of context, this revision of *qing* can be compared to the concept of "androgyny" in Western philosophy and aesthetics, in the sense that it refers to the ideal synthesis of male and female.<sup>30</sup> In this new definition of *qing*, the *yin* and *yang* elements were not only viewed as being complementary to each other, but each went through a process of transformation and adjustment that culturally redefined the male and female.

Insofar as *qing* was understood as being a "neutralizer" of gender distinctions, it might have helped some Ming-Qing women to perceive the conventional opposition of "talent" (*cai* 才) and "virtue" (*de* 德) in a new light. The common saying that "a woman without talent is a woman of virtue" (女子無才便是德) had apparently bothered many female poets, such that they often found it necessary to use the "discourse of women's virtue" to defend their talent as well as their active involvement in literary activities.<sup>31</sup> This is because under the influence of orthodox Confucianism some women (and men) believed that talent itself could impair one's virtue.<sup>32</sup> However, the growing recognition of *qing* as a female attribute provided new insight: since *qing* originally referred both to a natural writing style and the inner virtue of the poet, it could be reasoned that what is produced by a female poet in writing—that is, the natural expression of her "pure" mind—was a reflection of her virtue. It could further be argued that not only is a women's literary talent not an obstacle to her virtue, but, instead, a stimulus to her moral convictions. Thus, the famous woman poet and artist Wu Qi 吳琪 says in her preface to Zou Yi's *Hong jiao ji*, "writing can never be harmful to a woman's moral integrity."<sup>33</sup> Perhaps it was this new confidence in themselves which led Ming-Qing women to produce an unprecedented amount of poetry, and to devote themselves to compiling women's anthologies (which often included their own works) as a way of bringing women into the literary canon.

In this context, Ming-Qing China readily reminds one of 18th and 19th century England when women writers entered the literary profession in record numbers. Like the Ming-Qing female poets, British women novelists were extremely prolific and a great many of them entered the literary market. However, unlike the Ming-Qing women, British women novelists in the 18th and 19th century did not meet with the general approval of their male peers, and consequently few received practical support or help from them. In fact, according to Elaine Showalter, a gender war between male and female authors ignited during this time, especially when men began to

feel threatened by what they perceived to be a "female literary invasion" in which women novelists seemed to be "engaged in a kind of aggressive conspiracy to rob men of their markets, steal their subject matter, and snatch away their young lady readers. . . ." <sup>34</sup> Under the pressure of competition, many male intellectuals claimed that women were unable to write great novels because of their "inexperience in life," their "sexual innocence," and the fact that they would "always be imitators and never innovators." <sup>35</sup> Even Robert Southey, the great British poet laureate, proclaimed: "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life and it ought not to be." <sup>36</sup>

It was in the context of this predominantly male world that British "feminist" writers were born. These feminists rejected the conventional code of female self-sacrifice, insisted on their independence, participated in the suffrage movement, and tried to break down the male "monopoly" of publishing by establishing their own publishing outlets. <sup>37</sup> There were of course other female writers who used different strategies to cope with male prejudice and hostility, such as adopting male pseudonyms to avoid discrimination, explaining their need for relief from financial crises, or justifying their writing and literary activities as deeds of self-sacrifice—the last of these strategies serves to remind us of the Ming-Qing women's discourse of "virtue" (*de*) which they used to neutralize and overcome the *cailde* dichotomy in an attempt to legitimize their writing.

The success story of the British women novelists tells us that most of their strategies seem to have worked, for modern readers well remember the great examples of Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot. After all, it is these few canonical women authors, along with male novelists like Charles Dickens and William Thackeray, who cause us to regard 19th century England as the Age of the Novel. However, as Elaine Showalter has argued, the impression of female greatness in this case might have come from a general misconception about women's literary history, which only acknowledges the contributions of a few great authors at the expense of lesser authors:

Criticism of women novelists, while focusing on these happy few, has ignored those who are not "great," and left them out of anthologies, histories, textbooks, and theories. Having lost sight of the minor novelists, who were the links in the chain that bound one generation to the next, we have not had a very clear understanding of the continuities in women's writing. . . . <sup>38</sup>

It is because of this incorrect view of women writers, Showalter emphasizes, that the diversity of English women novelists has been reduced to a tiny band of the "great." <sup>39</sup>

This problematic notion of the “great” as pointed out by Showalter seems to contrast sharply with the all-inclusive policy of many Ming-Qing poetry anthologies, in which both major and minor authors were meant to be included. In fact, in the minds of Ming-Qing anthologists, the exhaustive approach was the only good approach for them to use if they were to demonstrate the extraordinary range of women’s writings from ancient times. The term *caiguan* 采觀 (collecting), which the late Ming literati used to describe the general policy of their anthologies of women’s poetry, refers precisely to a sweeping, all-encompassing procedure of “collecting all,” including unearthing lost works by women.

Thus, regarding the “all-inclusive” approach of Wang Duanshu’s *Mingyuan shiwei* (which includes works by about 1,000 women poets), Wang’s husband Ding Shengzhao 丁聖肇 explained: “Why did my wife Yuying [Duanshu] compile this *Mingyuan shiwei*? It is because she cannot bear to see excellent poems by women of our times vanish like mist and grass.”<sup>40</sup> Obviously, as early as the late Ming, Chinese poets and scholars, both male and female, were already aware of the danger of losing sight of women’s literary works—especially works of minor female figures which might later be hard to retrieve. In other words, the Ming-Qing literati and female writers, in their common attempt to promote women, seem to have done their best to rewrite women’s literary history by adopting a broadly based strategy and preservation mechanisms. Fortunately, many of the anthologies of women’s poetry compiled in the Ming and Qing are still available in libraries in the U.S., Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, and elsewhere.

Most curious of all, however, is the fact that Ming-Qing women poets (many of whom had already distinguished themselves as canonical authors in their own times) have been almost completely ignored by literary historians of the twentieth century. Indeed, it is only recently that critics, inspired by contemporary feminist scholarship, have begun to read these works. It has been observed by Maureen Robertson that Liu Dajie’s critically acclaimed history of premodern Chinese literature mentions only five women writers and none of them from the Ming and Qing dynasties.<sup>41</sup> Until recently, most modern texts of literary criticism have mentioned Tang and Song women poets like Xue Tao 薛濤, Li Qingzhao 李清照 and Zhu Shuzhen 朱淑真—like fulfilling the “quota” of a modern-day committee<sup>42</sup>—without taking Ming-Qing women poets into consideration. Even those individuals who have read the collected works of some Ming-Qing women often project their gender biases into their evaluations. For example, the eminent historian Hu Shi 胡適 said, “Although there have been so many women writers in the last three hundred years, their contributions are unfortunately quite minimal. In most cases, their works are without value.”<sup>43</sup>

Under the influence of contemporary multiculturalism, one is tempted to interpret such biases as coming from the patriarchal ideology which always tends to marginalize women. According to Paul Lauter, the New Critics' strategy of "marginalizing" the woman poet Edna St. Vincent Millay is a good example of how a patriarchal ideology can trap people within their own biases.<sup>44</sup> Or, as Hazard Adams has explained, some critics view this kind of prejudice as contributing to the "power criteria" at work in the process of our constructing canons.<sup>45</sup> But critics like Harold Bloom would never agree with such an interpretation; for Bloom, great authors are made canonical mainly because of the "aesthetic value" found in their works, without any connection with the power factor.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the so-called "cultural wars" in America today have gradually focused on the question of canon-formation and its relation to gender and class.

However, canonicity is itself a mixed concept, a complex phenomenon not easily reduced to the simple principles of aesthetics and power. I am more concerned about how the canon has changed in literature, and how certain writers can stand the test of time and how some others cannot. In the words of the European scholar Ernst Robert Curtius, "it would be a useful task for literary science to determine how the canon of antique authors has changed from 1500 to the present, i.e., how it has diminished."<sup>47</sup> In his study of American literature, Richard H. Brodhead uses Hawthorne as an example to illustrate the "vicissitudes" of an author's rise and fall. He says:

Like his rise, Hawthorne's decline was intimately connected to a broader action of canon-construction in America. His decay presents a historical locus in which to study the questions raised by canonical degradation in general: by what process canons get dislodged or drained of force; what happens to the work such canons had included when it loses this system's cultural backing; and what the effects are for possible followers when authors get displaced from traditional positions of influence.<sup>48</sup>

All of which is to show how canon-formation and canonical decline are intimately linked to the whole cultural sphere of a particular period in history. In order to study the rise and decline of a certain author (or groups of authors) in time, we need to take all of the cultural, social and political factors into consideration. Brodhead's detailed study of Hawthorne demonstrates that literary traditions are never made accidentally.

But certainly, canonicity is also about selection and choices. As Louise Bernikow has said, "what is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices. Which writers have survived their time and

which have not depends upon who notices them and chose to record the notice."<sup>49</sup> If so, can we say that the general neglect of Ming-Qing women poets is caused by the gender biases of our modern-day historians and literary scholars who chose not to record their "notice" of these female talents? Or is it simply a result of our changing critical considerations whereby canonical inclusions and exclusions have to depend on our new cultural expectations and possibly the demands of our times? Or is it because our idealization of canonical ancient authors has become so overwhelming that we have ignored poets of the immediate past—that is, poets of Ming-Qing times? Any answers to such questions may be inconclusive. But however inconclusive they may be, canonicity itself exhibits the kind of power the critical community possesses. Today, as we try to reinterpret the Ming-Qing literati culture and its connection with the "vicissitudes" of the female poets' position in literature, we should be particularly aware of the tremendous power and cultural burden which have been placed upon us.

## Note

A different version of this paper was presented at the International Symposium, "New Directions in the Study of Late Imperial Literature and History," Organized by the Department of History at National Chung Cheng University and the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Arizona (Taipei, Taiwan, April 30-May 2, 1999). I am deeply grateful to Grace Fong, Robin Yates, and William R. Schultz who offered many useful suggestions for revision.

## Endnotes

1. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, "Canon," in their *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 73-75. See also articles by Joanna Russ, Lillian S. Robinson, and Paul Lauter in this anthology, pp. 97-150.
2. Of course, there were men who opposed women publishing poetry, Zhang Xuecheng being the most obvious representative. But in general, the Ming-Qing male literati's support of contemporary women poets was quite unprecedented.

3. See my "Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women's Poetry and their Selection Strategies," in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 147, 150; "Ming-Qing Women Poets and the Notions of 'Talent' and 'Morality'," in Theodore Hutters, R. Bin Wong, and Pauline Yu, eds., *Culture & State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 238.
4. See Wang Yi, *Li Sao jing zhang ju*, 離騷經章句 in Hong Xingzu, 洪興祖 ed., *Chuci buzhu* 楚辭補注 (rpt., Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1973), pp. 10-84.
5. Wendell V. Harris, "Canonicity," *PMLA* (January, 1991), p. 116.
6. See "Xuzhi 序志", Chapter 50 in *Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍注, ed. and commentary by Fan Wenlan 范文瀾 (Beijing, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1978), II: 727.
7. See *juan* 16 of Gu Yanwu's 顧炎武 *Rizhi lu* 日知錄 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985).
8. For the idea of the "marginalized literati," see Kang Zhengguo 康正果, "Bianyuan wenren de cainü qingjie ji qi suo chuanda de shiyi" 邊緣文人的才女情結及其所傳達的詩意, in his *Jiaozhi de bianyuan: Zhengzhi he xingbie* 交織的邊緣：政治和性別 (Taipei: Dongda, 1997), pp. 171-202.
9. There has been a continuing interest in He Shuangqing in recent years. See, for example, Grace Fong, "De-Constructing a Feminine Ideal in the Eighteenth Century: 'Random Records of West-Green' and the Story of Shuangqing," in Widmer and Chang ed., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, pp. 264-281; Kang Zhengguo, "Bianyuan wenren de cainü qingjie ji qi suo chuanda de shiyi," in his *Jiaozhi de bianyuan*, pp. 171-202; Du Fangqin 杜芳琴, *He Shuangqing ji* 賀雙卿集 (Henan: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1993); Chou Wanyao 周婉窈, "Xiaoshan chuanqi" 綃山傳奇, *Xinshixue* 新史學, 7 (1996): 159-197; Sunhee Kim Gertz and Paul S. Ropp, "Literary Women, Fiction, and Marginalization: Nicolette and Shuangqing," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 35.3 (1998): 219-254.
10. Right after the completion of this paper, I was pleased to read Sunhee Kim Gertz and Paul S. Ropp's article where, in a footnote, they also mentioned Cao Xueqin and Shi Zhenlin in the same context of literati culture: "Cao and Shi also seem to share a near-religious devotion to

the aesthetic realm. Aesthetic beauty may be created in the mind to compensate for suffering and disappointment in "the real world," but both these authors affirm the coequal reality . . . of the aesthetic and the material worlds...." (Gertz and Ropp, "Literary Women, Fiction, and Marginalization: Nicolette and Shuangqing", p. 254).

11. *The Story of the Stone*, trans. by David Hawkes (New York: Penguin, 1973), 1:50.
12. Chong Tianzi 蟲天子 (pseudonym), ed., *Xiangyan congshu* 香艷叢書 (1909-1911; rpt. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1992), 5 vols.
13. Although in modern context the term *xiangyan* often has connotations of or emphasis on sensuality and eroticism, *xiangyan* in the Ming-Qing context does not necessarily carry such meaning. Moreover, to the Ming-Qing literati, any literary work related to women could be considered *xiangyan*, provided that it is also characterized by ornate diction and flowery imagery.
14. Hu Wenkai 胡文楷, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 歷代婦女著作考, rev. ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), p. 898.
15. Hu Wenkai, p. 876.
16. Hu Wenkai, p. 885.
17. Hu Wenkai, p. 897.
18. Zhong Xing, preface to his *Mingyuan shigui* 名媛詩歸. N.p., late Wanli Period.
19. See Huang Kejian 黃克劍, "'Qing'—Wei Jin renwu pinzao zhong de yige zhongyao shenmei fanchou" 清—魏晉人物品藻中的一個重要審美範疇, *Fujian luntan* 福建論壇, vol. 5 (1985); Zhang Hongsheng 張宏生, *Jianghu shipai yanjiu* 江湖詩派研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), p. 125.
20. See Chapters on "Shangyu" 賞譽 and "Rongzhi" 容止, in *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962).
21. Translation adopted, with minor modification, from Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University, Council on East Asian Studies, 1992), p. 65.
22. "Mingshi" 明詩, Chapter 6 of *Wenxin diaolong*, in Fan Wenlan, ed., 1:67.
23. Translated by Victor H. Mair, *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. by Victor H. Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 205.

24. See a discussion of the notion of "dandeng nüshi" 擔簦女史 (Professional Women), in Yu-chih Lai, "Longing for Landing: A study on the Image of 'Water' in Huang Yuan-chieh's Poetry" (seminar paper).
25. See Huang Yuanjie's preface to Li Yu's *Yizhong yuan*, in *Li Yu quanji* 李漁全集, rev. ed., (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1992): 4:318.
26. Wang Duanshu 王端淑, *Mingyuan shiwei* 名媛詩緯, 4.12b. For a discussion of this point, see also Zhong Huiling 鍾慧玲, *Qingdai nüshiren yanjiu* 清代女詩人研究, Ph.D. diss. (Zhengzhi daxue, Taiwan, 1981), p. 261.
27. Wang Duanshu, *Mingyuan shiwei*, 4.12b.
28. Xi Peilan 席佩蘭, *Changzhen ge ji* 長真閣集, *juan* 4. See also Zhong Huiling, *Qingdai nüshiren yanjiu*, pp. 264-265.
29. See Shen Shanbao 沈善寶, *Mingyuan shihua* 名媛詩話, *juan* 4, in *Qing shihua fangyi chubian* 清詩話訪佚初編, ed. by Du Songbo 杜松柏 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 1987), 9:167. It is obvious that in her concept of poetry Shen Shanbao was greatly influenced by Wang Shizhen, as may be seen in her reference to Wang Shizhen's *Yuyang Shihua* 漁洋詩話. See, for example, her *Mingyuan shihua*, *juan* 2, in *Qing shihua fangyi chubian*, 9:59.
30. For the notion of androgyny in Western philosophy and aesthetics, see Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 21-22. For the idea of "cultural androgyny" in the Ming-Qing literati culture, see my "Zou xiang 'nannü shuangxing' de lixiang: nüxing shiren zai Ming Qing wenren zhong de diwei" 走向“男女雙性”的理想：女性詩人在明清文人中的地位, in my *Gudian yu xiandai de nüxing chanshi* 古典與現代的女性闡釋 (Taipei: Lianhe wenxue, 1998), pp. 72-84.
31. For the "discourse on women's virtue," see Maureen Robertson, "Changing the Subject: Gender and Self-Inscription in Authors' Prefaces and 'Shi' Poetry," in Widmer and Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, pp. 181-189. For the *cailde* dispute concerning Ming-Qing women, see also Clara Wing-Chung Ho (Lau Wing-Chung 劉詠聰), *De cai se quan: Lun Zhongguo gudai nüxing* 德才色權：論中國古代女性 (Taipei: Maitian, 1998), pp. 165-309. Also, in her recent paper, Ellen Widmer observes that from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the 1790s Chinese



- women were more reluctant to display their writing skills, perhaps due to the common emphasis on virtue rather than talent. (See her "From Wang Duanshu to Yun Zhu: The Changing Face of Women's Book Culture in Qing China," a paper presented at the Conference. "From Late Ming to the Late Qing: Dynastic Decline and Cultural Innovation," Columbia University, November 7, 1998.)
32. See my "Ming Qing Women Poets and the Notions of 'Talent' and 'Morality'," in Hutters, Wong and Yu, eds., *Culture & State in Chinese History*, pp. 236-258.
  33. In *Qingdai mingyuan wenyuan* 清代名媛文苑, as cited in Zhong Huiling, *Qingdai nüshiren yanjiu*, p. 246.
  34. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from the Brontës to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 39, 75.
  35. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, pp. 79, 26, 3.
  36. Quoted in Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 55.
  37. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 30-31.
  38. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 7.
  39. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 7.
  40. *Mingyuan shiwei*, Vol. 1, *juan* 1, 1a. See also my "Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women's Poetry and their Selection Strategies," in Widmer and Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, p. 158.
  41. Maureen Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China," *Late Imperial China* 13.1 (1992): 64.
  42. Kang Zhengguo 康正果, *Nüquan zhuyi yu wenxue* 女權主義與文學 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1994), p. 76.
  43. Hu Shi 胡適, *Sanbai nian zhong de nüzuojia* 三百年中的女作家, in *Hui Shi zuopin ji* 胡適作品集, No. 14 (Taipei: Yuanliu, 1986), p. 167.
  44. Paul Lauter, "Caste, Class, and Canon" (1981/87), in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, rev. ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 140-141.
  45. Hazard Adams, "Canons: Literary Criteria/Power Criteria," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Summer 1988): 748-764.
  46. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994), p. 1.

47. Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (1953; rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 263.
48. Richard H. Brohead, *The School of Hawthorne* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 201.
49. Louis Bernikow, "The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552-1950 (New York, 1974), p. 3. I am indebted to Elaine Showalter for a reminder of the existence of this source; see her *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 36.