Introduction

In imperial China, women’s writing had an anomalous status; it received no official sanction, and women were categorically barred from all access to a public career. In contrast, men were authorized to participate in the functioning and governing of the imperium through the institutions of a formal educational program and the civil service examination system. Men’s writing was constitutive of the power of culture. Women lived in what one feminist critic refers to as “a fundamental structure of exclusion.” Nevertheless, in the localized contexts of family, region, and under varying circumstances and particular historical moments, women’s informal education and writing took shape and left their imprint. In the early and medieval periods (second century B.C.E. to the tenth century C.E.), a small number of women in the elite classes had, by virtue of their learning and talent, wielded the brush to write for a variety of personal, social, and, if rarely, political reasons. A few exceptional talents among them even achieved a hallowed place in the received canon alongside vast numbers of august male authors. The woman scholar Ban Zhao (ca. 48–ca. 118) and the song lyricist Li Qingzhao (1084–ca. 1151) are two well-known names, and the slim roster of recognized literary women also included a few courtesans and Daoist nuns who served the scholar-official class during the Tang (618–907). Women had a very limited presence in early literary culture, and, by extension, continued to be marginalized in modern scholarship and literary history.

This picture of absence has begun to change in the last fifteen years with the rediscovery of textual productions by women of the educated class—guixiu or talents of the inner quarters—beginning in the late Ming (seventeenth century) and lasting till the end of the Qing (1911). These gentlewomen’s not-insubstantial volumes of writings have engaged concerted scholarly attention and research and opened up new vistas in the direction and methods of historical inquiry. Focusing on the formation and characteristics of women’s culture and their participation in family and society from this period, the seminal works of cultural historians, such as Dorothy
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Ko and Susan Mann, have broken new ground by drawing on the poetry and other writings by Ming-Qing women as major historical sources. Their studies challenge and revise modern historiographical discourse and institutional histories that inscribe traditional Chinese women, if at all, as the subordinated and silent gender. In ways not possible before the rediscovery of women’s textual production, Ko and Mann rendered visible and significant the flourishing literary and social communities of educated women centered in the sophisticated culture of the Yangzi delta region in this late imperial moment.

While revisionist women’s histories have recovered general patterns as well as rich details of women’s life and culture in late imperial Chinese society, few studies have made these women’s writings themselves, which consisted predominantly of poetic genres, a serious focus of investigation and analysis. A major problem lies in the inaccessibility of these women’s writings. As “minor” literature, they were not well circulated or preserved. Those that survived the vicissitudes of history are now generally locked in rare book archives in libraries in China and Japan. Several of the key texts used in the present study took several summers of archival research to locate and reproduce.

A more critical problem lies in the question of approach. Once a certain number of women’s texts are recovered, how should we assess, read, interpret, and represent them in literary scholarship? In a study of women poets of the Romantic Period, Isobel Armstrong points to this predicament in relation to the study of male poets: “We have had two hundred years to discover a discourse of and strategies for reading male poets. They belong to a debate, a dialectic; we know how to think about politics, epistemology, power, and language, in productive ways that, whether it is Mathew Arnold or Paul De Man who writes, make these poets mean for us. A hermeneutics has evolved. Not so with the female poets. We are discovering who they are, but there are few ways of talking about them.” This remark can be readily applied to the situation with regard to critical scholarship and commentarial tradition in Chinese poetry. Here the problem is compounded by the fact that the hermeneutics goes back more than two thousand years for the male tradition, yet we only rediscovered Chinese women poets less than a couple of decades ago, in the West and in China.

Nevertheless, the recognition of women’s prominent participation in literary culture since the seventeenth century has compelled us to reflect on the significance of their writing, and pioneering efforts have been made to bring this literary production to the attention of scholars and readers in the Western world. Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy undertook the challenging task as editors of the monumental project of translating women’s poetry and writings about women’s poetry from ancient times to the early twentieth century in the anthology *Women Writers of Traditional China* (1999). More recently, Wilt Idema and Beata Grant constructed a separate history of women’s literature by locating their massive translations of
women’s writings in much-needed biographical and historical contexts, while noting the historical “tides” of women’s writing in *The Red Brush* (2004). Other studies have examined the publication and anthologizing of women’s poetry and initiated exploration of thematic and topical terrain, and the textual construction of subject position and voice in texts by women. Recently in China and Taiwan, scholars such as Zhang Hongsheng, Deng Hongmei, and Chung Hui-ling, with their greater accessibility to primary sources, have also produced comprehensive literary histories and more in-depth studies of women’s poetry.

This book is about finding “ways of talking about them,” ways to engage with some of these newly accessible women poets and their writing practices. However, while literary issues do weigh in my discussion and underlie my analysis, I will not attempt a thematic study of their poetry or another version of a literary history of women’s writing. I am not interested in constructing an essentialized “female” tradition, canon, or countercanon in opposition to or supplementing the received “male” tradition. The logic of canon formation is exclusionary and hierarchizing. Canons can blind us rather than broaden our vision. Too often in the literary field at large, efforts to examine and situate women’s poetry are confronted by questions of literary merit and quality: are their poems good? Did women write good poetry? Were they capable of writing good poetry? The underlying assumption of such questions is that gender is an essential/essentialist determinant of literary and aesthetic value. Women’s poetry is a priori suspect, devalued, and trivialized; only men were capable of writing good poetry. We know better now that evaluative questions must be relativized, grounded in historical narratives of changing standards and values; they must be historicized within shifting poetic theories and aesthetic tastes, and contextualized by economic and social conditions. If, then, we are interested in mapping relative values of good and bad, our contextualized readings would be able to demonstrate that some women did indeed write some very good poems, as some men also did, while the vast bulk of poetic production has a value for study in a different mode of analysis. Perhaps, however, a different conceptual model of literary history may be attempted, one which takes into account the discursive formation that is poetry in the lives of men and women in the late imperial period.

In this book I want to explore other ways of approaching women’s writing than simply recuperating them to address or be a part of an elitist humanist aesthetics. In its commitment to textual analysis and interpretation and the pleasure of the text, this study allies itself with literary scholarship. But in rethinking women’s writing as forms of cultural practice, I try to articulate in my analysis the economy and significance of women’s textual production in more than a purely literary framework because the social and cultural dynamics of these texts exceed the narrow confines of such a framework. In this sense, my approach reflects the “cultural turn” in literary studies.

I begin with the fact that the gentry women who produced poetry, like men,
undertook the literary training and discipline to master the classical forms current in their lifetimes. But unlike their brothers, the women's access to learning was uneven. Under different circumstances and to varying degrees of accomplishment, the women learned the language, tropes, conventions, and other formal features of the poetic tradition and manipulated them with differing skills and degrees of attainment. So women wrote. But when, under what circumstances, and why? What did poetry “do” for them that so many of them formed lifetime habits of, even obsessions with, writing? Clearly, the affect of poetry, the emotional investment in the production of those lines and couplets in fixed meter and rhyme, and the laborious effort and time devoted to the preservation of their own and other women's poetry encompass but go beyond mere aesthetic pleasure. I believe, for many women (and men), a strong connection exists between writing and structures of desire and agency in imperial China. The classical notion that one's written word (yan) constitutes one of three means—alongside action and virtue—to achieve posthumous “immortality” was in no way lost on educated women.10

Similarly, since the Song period (960–1278) writing women and their male supporters seized upon the canonical conception that poetry articulates a person’s intention/emotion, which was derived from the “Great Preface” of the ancient Shi jing (Book of Odes), and upon the belief that the classic itself contains works by women to legitimize women’s participation in poetic production.11 I use the loaded word “author” advisedly to refer to these writing women in the Ming and Qing, producers of poetic words and essays, to foreground their negotiated or appropriated position as subjects of enunciation.12 Precisely because they speak from the position of discursively constituted subjects of culture and ideology, these gendered producers of words exhibit a self-consciousness regarding the power of words for self-empowerment, at the same time as they exhibit anxiety towards the fallibility of words and the power of (mis)reading and the loss of control over meaning. They are thus fully aware of the dangers of their circulation (see the attempts by Gan Lirou and Xing Cijing to “authorize” their own writings in Chapters 1 and 3). The entrenched notion that writing, but in particular poetry, embodies the personality and intention of a “person,” or the “speaker” in the poem, is also at play in the politics and affect of reading.

Drawing on Western studies in his discussion of the power of writing in early China, Mark Edward Lewis identifies six roles writing played in the generation of authority as operative in the Warring States period (ca. fifth–sixth centuries B.C.E.): “(1) the use of writing as a technique of state power, primarily in the form of administrative and legal documents; (2) the creation of groups through the shared experience of reading a common body of materials; (3) the transcending of time and space; (4) the invention within texts of figures of authority, often the implicit author, who both speak to the readers and offer models for social roles; (5) the use of written graphs to create or preserve ‘artificial’ or ‘technical’
languages whose mastery distinguishes elements within a society; and (6) the treatment of written graphs as magical or sacred objects containing hidden meanings and powers.”13 Where the role of writing and writer can be transposed from the public realm and state functions to the personal and private, as those in points (2), (3), and (4), women also put the uses of writing and reading to create literary and social communities (discussed in Chapter 4), to transcend the temporal-spatial and social limitations of the individual subject (Chapters 2 and 3), and to represent themselves as authors of their life histories (Chapters 1 and 2).

Particular writing practices embody and exemplify agency. The notion of agency, contested as its origin or production is in recent feminist theorizing,14 suggests the ability and will to take action purposefully and self-consciously and is imbricated with concepts like “selfhood,” “individuality,” and “subjecthood.” While agency should not be reified as an inherent attribute of an individual, which decontextualizes it, as feminist historian Joan Scott insists,15 the social constructivist position that subjects, identities, and bodies are constituted by discourse and ideology has prompted a revisioning of the importance and salience of human agency in cultural understanding in recent studies in several disciplines.16 In her study of Ming-Qing women’s self-representation, Maureen Robertson indirectly took up the question of agency by showing how women “changed the subject” in poetic representation from the feminine object constituted by male poets to active writing subjects in their lyric poetry.17

In this study I draw on agency for its theoretical potential to shed light on the interstices between subjection and subjectivity, a space homologous to the (self-)positioning of historical women. I am therefore interested in exploring writing as particularized by gendered subformations, that is, writings not seen as produced by a monolithic, homogeneous category of gentry women, but analyzed according to women’s differential positioning within a normative female hierarchy as daughters, mothers, wives, concubines, maids, etc., and according to woman as subject simultaneously implicated in conflicting and contradictory “discursive injunctions,”18 the “herself” of the title. From this perspective, I agree with Tani Barlow’s argument that in premodern China there was no transcendent or foundational category of woman/women conceptualized outside their kinship-defined roles.19 However, if we examine writing produced in certain temporal-spatial instances, we can discover or glimpse women as agents exceeding the family- or lineage-centered structure, whether momentarily or figuratively acting in non-kinship defined roles, as friends, travelers, critics, artists, and connoisseurs, in which they make space for a degree of difference, of change, even of authority and autonomy, through taking up the “tool” of writing and reading (compare the three apposite roles of writing cited above from Mark Edward Lewis). In writing, they open up alternative subject positions beyond kin roles. For example, when Wang Fengxian (fl. early seventeenth century) addresses her farewell poem to the plants she has grown in the magistrate’s
residence where they lived for three years during her husband’s term of office, in that enunciation she constructs herself as a gardener (Chapter 3). In her poetry collection, the concubine Shen Cai (b. 1752) assumes and performs a series of alternative roles as student, teacher, critic, reader, calligrapher, and art connoisseur (Chapters 2 and 4). To borrow Seán Burke’s statement on the problematic relation between author and self, these women’s “act of authorship can present itself as self-deflection or indeed as the creation of an aesthetic identity which seeks to transcend or negate the biographical subject.”

Some of these writings are ironically framed within the quotidian time and space of home (Shen Cai in Chapter 2), others by extraordinary circumstances and distant journeys (Chapter 3). In many cases I was first drawn by these writings’ remarkable narrative constructions—whether of a life history, a journey, subject positions, or literary authority. These texts demonstrate women’s contingent capacity for action and claim to authority. In sum, I adopt the notion of agency to explore forms of subjectivity and enactments of subject positions in the intersection between textual practice and social inscription that suggest instances and modes of self-empowerment within an ideological system of constraint, Confucian orthodoxy, in the context of late imperial China. However, we have to recognize that women’s capacity for action did not form a linear progression in this period. Oftentimes, women’s learning and literacy were co-opted in various ways by the system for its own reproduction. Agency, then, was an uneven and limited experience, as there did not exist social or political support for women to make wider connections and to organize and mobilize themselves into any sustained social movement for gender equity across regional and class divides.

Back in 1997 Maureen Robertson astutely pointed out that “[a]ccess to collections now lost would contextualize, far better than the selected poems available in anthologies, contemporary representations of Ming and Qing women as writers.” Indeed, research in the field, as I noted above, has been hampered by the lack of availability of individual collections of women’s writings, and this has negative consequences for our ability to discuss women’s poetry without committing errors of misrepresentation. For this study I have therefore endeavored to include Ming and Qing women with substantial individual collections for discussion in each chapter. With the exception of the key text in Chapter 1, several of the others are extraordinary texts I discovered during extensive archival research conducted in rare book collections in major libraries in China. It is testimony to the increased attention to women’s writing in China (and my long sojourn with these writings) that two of these texts have been reprinted in modern editions. While I read the texts (poetry and some prose) as the mediated site of subject construction in which women writers engage in different ways with literary language and convention, I also examine closely these literary collections in contextual dimensions.

The central question underlying the four chapters is: how are gendered agency
and subjectivities produced within normative roles and identities, some of which are marginally located in social and/or geographic terms? To work through this question, I engage with a range of issues concerning women’s writing practices in the everyday, from the social and material conditions of textual production to strategies of self-representation, by focusing on reading and analysis of specific texts and collections. I also place importance on the women’s role in the compilation and publication of their own individual collections. How the collection is structured, organized, and named, and by whom has authorial and narrative implications.

Chapter 1 explores the meaning and function of the autobiographical impulse that underlies much of women’s textual production and its relation to biographical representation. It points to women’s desire and effort to carve out a place for themselves in family, social, or cultural memory through writing, a theme which will be encountered in subsequent chapters. Women acted on the knowledge that they could bring about recognition and remembrance through the imprint of their own words. Specifically, this chapter presents a common pattern of self-writing in the paradigmatic, autobiographically conceived collection of poetry and prose by Gan Lirou (1743–1819), the Yongxuelou gao (Drafts from the Pavilion for Chanting about Snow). It is noteworthy that Gan was not from the well-known Jiangnan region, where gentry women’s culture flourished in the Ming and Qing, but lived almost her entire life in the district of Fengxin, in the somewhat peripheral province of Jiangxi. At the risk of reading unproblematically the life and identities represented in poetry by a woman who accepts the roles assigned to her in her culture and society and finds meaning and fulfillment through them, I follow Gan Lirou’s chronological arrangement of her own poems in my translation and discussion of her everyday life from childhood to old age in order to retain the integrity of her self-narrative. In this way we can also map a “poetic career” that demonstrates a lifelong dedication to writing in a sense common to many Ming and Qing women.

While Chapter 1 presents the autobiographical poetry collection of a principal wife who followed the normative pattern of womanhood from birth to death, Chapter 2, in contrast, focuses on the poetry produced by concubines, a category of women who occupied socially and ritually inferior positions in the female hierarchy within the polygamous household. This chapter shows how women with a lower social status could, through writing poetry, articulate some forms of subjecthood. Given the social marginality of concubines, their writings provide provocative glimpses into the possibilities for transforming oneself and overcoming subalternity by constituting oneself as a writing subject, by becoming “herself an author.” As an exemplary case study, I analyze the stylistic appropriations and subject constructions in the Chunyulou ji (Collection of Spring Rain Pavilion), a collection of poetry and essays printed in her own calligraphy by Shen Cai. Married as a young concubine to the bibliophile Lu Xuan at the age of twelve, Shen Cai received her upbringing and education from the principal wife, Peng Zhenyin, herself a poet. Shen Cai’s
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poetry adopts a pronounced feminine and sensual style, particularly her song lyrics. Those on the feminine body, from breasts to bound feet, evince a bold erotic style uncharacteristic of gentry wives’ poetry.

Chapter 3 examines records of journeys—in prose and poetry—written by women as a result of the apparent increase in travel undertaken by women in the Ming and Qing. The circumstances and duration of travel varied. At one end of the spectrum, daughters, wives, and concubines accompanied fathers and husbands to official postings, as is illustrated by the Donggui jishi (An Account of the Homeward Journey East), the travel record of Wang Fengxian, and the travel poems of the concubine Li Yin (1616–1685) in her poetry collection the Zhuxiaoxuan yincao (Recited Drafts from Laughing Bamboo Studio). At the other end, widows transported their husbands’ coffins home for burial in the family cemetery and recorded their journeys both passionately (Xing Cijing [fl. early seventeenth century]) and dispassionately (Zhang Wanying [nineteenth century]). All journeys became potential occasions for recording by literate women. By reading the nuanced constructions of gendered subjectivities in these texts, I explore the constitution of gendered agency in travel.

In the final chapter, I investigate the forms and rhetoric of poetic criticism adopted or invented by women poets and critics from the period of the Ming-Qing transition to the late Qing. These include discursive practices located in prefatory materials to anthologies and poetry collections, letters, poems discussing poetry, shihua literature (critical works focusing on poetry), and critical anthologies. In particular, I discuss and compare the critical principles and rhetorical strategies underlying the commentaries in three acclaimed works produced at different historical junctures: Guixiu ji (Anthology of Talents of the Women’s Quarters) by Ji Xian (1614–1683), Mingyuan shiwei (Classics of Poetry by Women of Note) by Wang Duanshu (1621–ca. 1680), and Mingyuan shihua (Remarks on Poetry by Notable Women) by Shen Shanbao (1808–1862). These women moved into authoritative textual positions: more than ordinary writers and readers, they assumed the roles of compilers, editors, critics, and commentators on other women’s and sometimes also men’s literary productions. In the process the sense of “community”—both real and imagined—informs the production of critical discourse on women’s poetry and is also constructed within that discursive space.

This book is thus a first exploration into the writing practices of just a small sample of the thousands of women writers in late imperial China. Although it has taken me many years to rediscover, translate, and reflect upon their poetic production, I hope the reader finds as much interest and pleasure in reading about these writers as I have had in researching them and bringing their presence into the twenty-first century.