
Following Dorothy Ko and Susan Mann’s seminal studies of gentry women’s lives and literary production in late imperial China, Grace S. Fong’s new book Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China investigates the writings of Ming-Qing upper-class women from the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, and recovers many women poets previously ignored by scholars either because of their geographical isolation from the cultural nexus of women’s writings in the Jiangnan area, or their marginal status as concubines. Fong approaches historical women’s textual production by centering on the relation of writing to agency, and argues that women authors manifested their agency and asserted their own subjectivity through writing and constructing the imagined literary community and the actual networks of women writers. Fong elegantly demonstrates how literary women employed literary genres and practices previously belonging to men—poetry, travel writing, literary criticism—to self-consciously represent themselves in history through self-inscription. The book has four chapters.

In Chapter 1, Fong studies the self-documented poetry collection Yongxuelou gao (Drafts from the Pavilion for Chanting about Snow) of Gan Lirou (1743-1819), a gentry woman who followed the normative pattern of womanhood in her life. Fong reads Gan Lirou’s self-conscious recording in poetry as significant autobiographical acts, and studies each stage of Gan’s life by analyzing her poetry: as a daughter, Gan engaged in literary interactions within the family, enjoyed sisterly intimacy and maternal guidance, and suffered from the loss and mourning of immediate family members; as a young wife in a companionate marriage, Gan enjoyed conjugal intimacy, linked verses with her husband, and developed close relationships with her sister in-law and maid; as a widow, she overcame grief and raised her two sons and two daughters. Through poetic communication and letters, she gave her children admonitions and instructions, and maintained strong ties with her natal family; after thirty years of widowhood, she led a retired life as the mother of a country magistrate, and formed literary and social networks that could enhance her son’s career. Fong notices that Gan Lirou’s poetry was family-centered, and her location in Fengxi county, Jiangxi province made her isolated from other
literary women in the Jiangnan area; but Fong notices that Gan had “textual contact” with other women’s poetry (p. 47). Occasionally Gan’s work reveals her discontent with her gender limitation and her desire for public achievement, but Fong argues that such articulated gendered agency within Confucian gender norms did not gear towards gender equity.

In Chapter 2, Fong examines poetry written by concubines and argues that through writing poetry, women of marginal status could transform themselves into writing subjects and “construct spatial and emotional links otherwise denied them” (p. 61). She argues that concubines opened up a space for agency through literacy, their writings display a positive view of themselves and their environment, and their literary agency shows “more areas of negotiation” (p. 62). Unlike gentry women who burned their writings to avoid public exposure, concubines insisted on being recognized through writing and publishing; compared with principal wives whose writings were restrained in expressing emotions, concubines constructed subject positions freer to discuss their sensuality, romance, talents, and female body parts. Fong focuses on studying Chuyulou ji (Collection of Spring Rain Pavilion), a collection printed in her own calligraphy by Shen Cai (b.1752), a concubine to the scholar and bibliophile Lu Xuan. Fong notices that in literary practice the hierarchy between wife and concubine was often inverted (p. 72). Although Shen Cai used the conventional feminine imagery and boudoir language, she subverted the style of boudoir-erotic poetry by constituting an active feminine subject occupied with meaningful cultural activities.

In Chapter 3, Fong explores women’s travel writings in the Ming and Qing, and argues that both the traveling and the writing constituted women’s agency, and women writers inscribed provisional subjectivities in movement through space. Fong argues that women’s travel poetry “negotiated their language and voice within existing literary conventions and textual tradition” (p. 88). But inflected by their gender, age and social status, women’s travel poetry produced quite different intellectual and emotional effects. Fong discovers in the writings of a widow, Xing Cijing (first half of seventeenth century), who overcame hardships and dangers and transported her husband’s coffin for burial in the family cemetery, a strong sense of agency and empowerment. According to Fong, the poems and literary travel journal of Wang Fengxian (fl. early seventeenth century) reveal a heightened sensitivity and sensation, exhibiting perception, discernment and judgment. In contrast to the travel writings of wives, Fong notices the poetic
records of the concubine traveler Li Yin (seventeenth century), who accompanied her official husband to his many postings, expressed her feelings of “gendered impotence” (p. 109) and “uprootedness” (p. 115) as well as her efforts to “create an ordered, cultivated space in a seemingly endless worrisome journey” (p. 119).

In the last chapter, Fong investigates the form and rhetoric of women’s poetic criticism, arguing that women writers moved into authoritative textual positions by assuming the roles as compliers, editors, critics and commentators on other women’s literary productions. Fong maintains that women readers and critics often “emphasize native sensibility, natural emotions, and spontaneous inspiration in their critical discourse” (p. 158), and the women compilers’ desire was to “preserve and transmit” the moral and literary names and achievements of women writers (p. 158). She compares the critical principles and rhetorical strategies of anthologies edited by women: the 1636 anthology of empathy *Yirensi* (Their Thoughts) edited by Shen Yixiu (1590-1635), which is “infused with an intimate personal dimension” (p. 131); *Guixiu ji* (Anthology of Talents in the Women’s Quarters) edited by Ji Xian (1614-1683) pays attention to the “qi” (vital expression) that affected style and flow in the poems; *Mingyuan shiwei* (Classics of Poetry by Notable Women) edited by Wang Duanshu (1621-ca. 1680) which directs “the reader’s response to and interpretation of the poems and the poet” (p. 140) by providing the author’s life history and the critic’s judgment; and *Mingyuan shihua* (Remarks on the Poetry of Notable Women) edited by Shen Shanbao (1808-1867) which takes poetry as a medium to create “real and imagined communities among women based on their roles as writers, readers, and critics” (p. 145).

Fong’s elegant translation of women’s poetry reveals cultural nuances and historical allusions hidden in those lines of poems. The bilingual presentation of women’s poetry enhances the aesthetic appeal of those poems.

(Yuxin Ma, University of Louisville)