
In this anthology fourteen scholars from diverse disciplines explore the features, utility and importance of women’s biographical writing in China over two thousand years. The book makes a threefold contribution: first, it concludes that the real historical women in those biographies existed within the cultural principles that produced such stories. As constructed and constructing subjects, they participated in their cultural production by accommodating and negotiating with cultural principles, and appropriating and reinterpreting the gender discourse. Second, it argues that historical women could adjust their roles to adapt to changes and make the wisest choice at a given moment or a crucial life stage to achieve importance. Third, it sets a good example of how alternative sources (Buddhist and Daoist ones, unofficial biography, diary, poems, letters and prefaces composed by women, and oral interviews) can supplement exemplar tales and probe into women’s private lives, feelings and emotions. Part I addresses theoretical issues. Susan Mann proposes that scholars can use their historical knowledge and imagination to decipher the silence and vacancy in their sources. Gail Hershatter’s study of how model peasant women were culturally and politically produced in the PRC questions the existence of the subjects’ interiority.

Part II explores the convention and function of women’s exemplar tales in imperial China. Since exemplary women were political and cultural products of the state, scholars treated such tales as signifiers with multiple meanings, which served to standardize and discipline social norms in times of political and cultural chaos. Qian Nanxiu rescues the xianyuan (intellectual women who were independent and self-sufficient) tradition by studying biographies composed by private families and argues for the existence of a chorus of different voices on women’s lives before the Ming. If the lienü tradition in official history made women stereotypes of Confucian virtues, the xianyuan tradition reflected the Daoist influence on women’s lives. Lu Weijing examines the biographies of chaste virgins (zhennü) in the Ming-Qing era and finds that

1 See also the English language edition published by Joan Judge and Hu Ying, University of California Press 2011.
controversies on zhennü reveal the deep division among Confucian men on ritual and women’s morality. Lu argues that although zhennü biographies defended the radical behavior of chaste virgins, they reveal the pain those father-authors felt toward their daughters’ decisions. Joan Judge uses Wei Xiyuan’s (1908-?) Xiuxiang gujin xiannüzhuan (Illustrated biographies of exceptional women) to analyze his complex ideology as a reformer. Although Wei emphasized that ancient feminine virtues had moral significance in his age, he also embraced the new woman ideal and advocated modern education for women. Hu Ying studies plays and poems about Qiu Jin and finds the martyr discourse was influenced by the moral standards of the authors’ day: late Qing authors emphasized Qiu Jin’s feminine qualities, treating her as a moral exemplary who was wronged; revolutionaries portrayed her as a martyr who sacrificed herself to protect others; and May Fourth writers depicted her as a new woman who broke away from the family and devoted her life to the nation.

Authors in Part III explore alternative sources in studying imperial Chinese women. Yao Ping investigates women’s epitaphs in the Tang and argues that the rise of Buddhism and the civil service exam gradually altered the foci of such biographies. The literary talent of daughters, the ability of wives to support their husbands’ official career, and the role of mothers in preparing sons for the exam were increasingly emphasized. Women’s Buddhist beliefs were shown as strengthening their Confucian virtues. Beverley Bossler addresses the increasing emphasis on chastity in women’s non-official biographies from late Tang to Yuan, and finds a link between women’s didactic texts and entertainment literature—both emphasized emotion, desire and women’s bodies. Since the idealized female virtues that male writers prescribed for their fictive heroines overlapped with the laudable qualities of women in their own class, the chaste courtesan discourse during this period had an impact on later biographies of upper class women. Katherine Carlitz compares the aggressive female characters in mid-Ming novels with women of virtue mentioned in Ming epitaphs, and finds that although the Confucian elite families’ emphasis on women’s virtues led to the standardization of such biographies, the celebration of romance and conjugal love in novels provided male literati with an alternative way to write about women. Patricia Ebrey uses a diary written by a minister Zeng Bu who served Empress Xiang (1046-1101) to supplement what the History of the Song missed about her, and constructs her relationships with palace ladies and her children as well as her importance and influence on court politics. Ann Waltner compares the biographies on Tanyangzi (1557-1590, a religious leader)
written by men with her letters to disciples, and finds her voice in those letters authoritative and gender-specific. Male biographers emphasized how Tanyangzi overcame her female body, emotion and desire to become a Daoist immortal. However, her letters indicate that her teaching and practice prescribed a specifically female path to cultivation.

Part IV turns to women’s own writing and narratives and comes up with intriguing findings. Wilt Idema finds Bo Shaojun’s (d. 1626) poems mourning over her deceased husband not only commemorated her husband but also left records to enshrine herself as a martyr (liefu). Ellen Widmer argues that women writers in mid-Qing Jiangnan inserted their own biographies into their prefaces to other women’s work. She finds that there was social resistance against women writing men’s biographies, and that poetry became an acceptable way for women to write about their lives. Yu Chien-ming interviews three Taiwanese women who experienced the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45) in different parts of China, and concludes that the war altered their decisions on marriage, family and childbirth. It also brought them new opportunities, broadened their horizons and increased their knowledge. The interviewees provide rich details often neglected by nationalist historiography—the plague of Chinese bandits, the impact of the conflict between the GMD and the CCP on people’s lives, the importance of modern transportation in the 1949 withdrawal, and the refugees’ diverse experience with indigenous Taiwanese. The book is a comprehensive study on Chinese women’s biographical writing.

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