
In this *opus magnum*, Wai-yee Li’s longest monograph yet, the author returns to Late Imperial literature and to the issue of gender, examined this time through the prism of historical trauma during the Ming-Qing transition. The erudition that Li exhibits through the 638 pages is a scholarly tour de force. Texts used in this investigation cover all possible literary and historical genres ranging from the late Ming to the early Republican era. The author concedes that, by doing so, she risks paying insufficient attention to generic history or conventions. But such generic and temporal breadth is exactly this work’s strength.

To be sure, this book does not yield to casual reading. The author expects the reader to follow her, page by page, through the nuanced, informed, and imaginative reading of literary texts. For less patient readers, a little more guidance or a summary might have been helpful. The thematic matters of the first two chapters are designed symmetrically, and their titles, “Male Voices Appropriating Female Diction” and “Female Voices Appropriating Masculine Diction” respectively, suggest as much. The first chapter covers a perennial theme in Chinese literature, namely, male authors assume female persona in their poetry and use their romantic longing, melancholy, and chastity as political tropes. In Chapter 2, a series of more or less obscure female poets’ works are closely examined to show how these poets, writing from their boudoirs or brothels, appropriated “dictions” traditionally reserved for male gentry-poetry. These dictions are employed not just to express their concerns for a dynasty that their men failed to defend but also to convey, in Li’s terms, “gender discontent” (p. 171).

Whereas the first two chapters use primarily poetry, Chapter 3 turns to popular literature to deal with the representation of real and imagined female heroes, whose challenge to patriarchal authority may be employed either “to dignify mourning” as an aesthetic spectacle, for a fallen dynasty which the men failed to defend, or, quite the opposite, “to imagine a new order” (p. 254). The last three chapters reveal how women’s chastity becomes a fluid symbol that may vindicate the male author’s hidden loyalism, justify their compromises, or be selectively commemorated as catharsis for the suppressed memory. Chapter 4 examines the transformation of Nanjing courtesans from “objects of desire” to heroes of resistance under the brush of a few prominent literati, often tainted by political compromise. Chapter 5 examines literature on or by the women abducted by Qing troops. Being at once victims and survivors, the compromised chastity of these women is a metaphor that facilitates
accommodation or displaces anxieties about compromise. Chapter 6 further focuses on the traumatic event of the Yangzhou Massacre. Whereas accounts of licentious women imply that the excessive sensuality of late Ming culture must have provided the karmic seeds of its destruction, the resistance of “chaste women” was eulogized as a substitute for the censored memory of male martyrdom.

The word “women” provides the narrative red thread throughout these chapters, but its meaning is ambiguous – ranging from real or imagined women (including poets, lovers, daughters, and victims) to a gendered narrative voice. A book on, say, “Men in the Ming-Qing Transition” is hardly conceivable, since the roles of men are deemed to be too diverse to be meaningfully covered in a single work. Yet “women,” as the silent companions or victims of men who made history, can be somehow comfortably treated as a group. In this sense, a book that apparently challenges male-centered historiography may have in effect consolidated the latter’s normative status. Indeed, at times the author’s gender-assignment to literary dictions betrays a certain tendency of essentialization. For instance, poetry with a historiographical function (examined through pp.112–130) is regarded as appropriating “masculine diction” – as writing history is understood as a task for men – even though its “dictions” are technically gender neutral. Even poetry that depicts its female author as aged and ugly is included here, which seems to imply that poems by women that do not depict them as objects of desire are considered to have used “masculine dictions.”

I would further argue that the distinction between “author,” “(authorial) voice,” and “(gendered) diction” deserves more nuanced qualification. Under closer examination, the parallelism between the titles of the first two chapters breaks down. Male poets often write poems that appear to be written by women – therefore appropriating a “feminine voice”; by contrast, female poets rarely pretend to write poems written by men—even though the authors may use gendered images or dictions. This may be because, as the voice of an “other,” a “feminine voice” can be invested with meaning; by contrast, a single “masculine voice” does not technically exist, as it can either be “gender neutral” or “heroic.”

Problematic gender expectations are also seen in the assignment of gendered pronouns in the translations of poetry, especially women’s poetry. Cases include wenren 文人 (should it be “men of letters” or simply “the educated”?) on page 161 and banseng 半僧 (could this “half-monk” be “she”?) on page 169. In both cases, as I suggest, these terms could be used self-referentially by their female authors.

These conundrums are results of the automated gendered imagination in our reading convention, which, in a sorry manner, persists even for a scholar studying women who flouted
gender boundaries. The reconfirmation of a patriarchal order similarly problematizes the author’s use of “gender discontent.” In many cases, it is expressed through the female poets’ aspiration for male heroism (e.g., p.172) or distaste for assigned household obligations (e.g., p.176). What these female authors desired, however, seemed to be actually to become men—rather than to challenge male dominance per se. Such self-loathing can suggest the internalization of established gender roles and hierarchy. Likewise, many writing women looked to men as their literary precursors—a choice that was not entirely due to the relative paucity of female role models, but rather due to the low regard for female authors that they (possibly unconsciously) shared.

Last but not least, I would like to caution against the author’s use of “national trauma.” As the book covers a broad temporal horizon, using this term to describe the traumatic memory of the Ming-Qing transition may obfuscate its distinction with that of the late Qing. The latter may be more justifiably called a “national trauma,” as modern national consciousness was introduced to China precisely during this era to support the agenda of nation-building. In contrast, loyalty for the fallen Ming seems more moralistic than nationalistic, as political compromise was more about personal integrity than about betraying the Han nation as an imagined community.

Admittedly, both gender and nationalism are tricky issues, and any treatment of them raises questions. Wai-yee Li’s outstanding work must be commended for its depth, erudition, academic rigor, and literary sensibility. It is recommended to every student of Late Imperial literature, history, and gender studies as an important contribution to the field of Chinese Studies.

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