

**Yang Binbin. *Heroines of the Qing: Exemplary Women Tell Their Stories*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2017. 230 pp. ISBN 9780295995496 (hardback).**

Yang Binbin's book explores little-known women writers who wrote and produced knowledge in response to political crises and cultural shifts in the late Qing dynasty. These women were adept at using normative values of female exemplary behaviours to highlight their vital economic contribution to their families and to society. Often, their self-representations were political criticisms as well as attempts to secure social and cultural prestige for themselves and their families. Yang argues that these women writers possessed "notions of self" and were "agents of social and cultural change" before the modern era, ca. 1911 (p. 156). Yang's book aligns with scholarship from the past few decades which has sought to develop a more nuanced understanding of women's lives and their roles in the family and state. Women's writing was a form of gender performance that challenged the patriarchal norms, and published writing, especially frowned on by some, was a key tool used by women to establish themselves as important members of families, lineages, and the state. Yang, like others writing on women's literature, argues that the rise of feminism in twentieth-century China was not a radical break for women writers in their expression of self and participation in a public or non-cloistered sphere.

Yang opens Chapter One with cases of outspoken women who led lives modelling exemplary womanly virtues, whose works point to uneasiness and tensions as they negotiated their normative roles within the family structure. One of the women Yang examines is Liu Yin from Wujin, Jiangsu, who, like others in the book, was a hardworking, filial and devoted wife and mother. Liu took on an overwhelming number of household management duties as well as the financial management of her husband's household. At the same time, she tutored her children and cared for the entire family of her absent husband. In doing so, she had to suppress her anguish after the death of her first son and to write letters encouraging her unsuccessful husband on the examination circuit. Yang compares Liu's letters to her husband with her personal collection of poems and writings and detects an undertone of anxiety, frustration and resentment. In one poem by Liu to her husband, she admonished him for forgetting his first wife who had also borne the brunt of the same hardship she was facing. Yang also examined two other women writers, Xie Xiangtang and Dong Baohong, who were equally outspoken about their hardships and sacrifices for their husbands' families and wrote in order to document their lives.

In Chapter Two, Yang introduces women writers who produced portraits and paintings for auto/biographical self-representations. Chen Yunlian wrote poetry and was a professional painter whose work depicting exemplary female behaviours was collected by contemporary elites. Here Yang introduces portraiture as a “social event” (p. 70) that documented the painter’s or author’s point of view and also solicited textual responses from audiences. Another woman, Zuo Xijia (1831-1894), drew and wrote not only for self-representation and the affirmation of her connections to social elites, but also desired to vindicate her martyr husband, Zeng Yong, who died upholding the Qing state in Zeng Guofan’s suppression of the Taiping rebellion.

In Chapter Three, Yang examines the works of Yuan Jingrong (1786- ca.1852) which reveal a formidable wife, mother and matriarch who financially supported and sustained her husband’s family and lineage and also wrote their genealogical records. Through Yuan’s poetry, the Wu genealogical records and prefaces by various social elites, Yang uncovers Yuan’s uxori-local marriage to Wu Jie, her financial and familial support for his civil service examination attempts and how she consolidated the sorry state of his lineage estate. Yuan’s moral authority was firmly established through her utilization of ritual propriety and female exemplarity in her writings.

In the last chapter, Yang introduces three women who were accomplished writers and commentators of political affairs in Qing China as well as competent medical practitioners and medical authors. The first is Chen Ershi (1785-1821) whose letters recorded her successful management of household health crises, from which she gained reputation as a medical practitioner and author of medical works. The second woman, Wang Ying (1781-1842), wrote and published essays that equated medicine to statecraft. She devoted much of her published work to demonstrating her thorough mastery of both literary and medical classics. In the person of the third woman, Zeng Yi (1852-1927), we see a prolific author of medical and other vernacular publications on new definitions of gender norms as well as the latest deliberations of hygiene theories. Like the other women, Zeng Yi again displayed her status as an expert in her writings which focused on what women should learn in order to support the new nation. Zeng was not willing to wait passively or have men such as Liang Qichao determine her role in the national crisis, but took the initiative to address what women could or should do. Unlike Chen Ershi who looked to the Confucian classics for answers to society’s woes, Zeng Yi addressed the need to incorporate “new learning”, advocating equal opportunities in learning for women and urging women to study medicine to serve the needs of the family and, in turn, the nation. When Zeng’s

publication came out in 1907, medicine was understood as key to public hygiene, and, by extension, to the strong modern nation which China was struggling to define and become.

Yang's analysis of these women of middling status is an important addition to what we know about women's writing in the late imperial period. "Hearing" the frustrations, anxieties, resentment, hope and determination interwoven in these works brings these women and heroines to life. Yang's work joins those of Li Xiaorong, Grace Fong and Ellen Widmer in uncovering the rich and dense lives of women in late Qing and early Republican China.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Li Xiaorong, *Women's Poetry of Late Imperial China: Transforming the Inner Chambers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012); Grace Fong, *Herself An Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); and Ellen Widmer, *Fiction's Family: Zhan Xi, Zhan Kai, and the business of Women in Late-Qing China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016).