

Negotiating the Traditional and the Modern: Chinese Women's Literature from the Late Imperial Period through the Twentieth Century

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THE INNER QUARTERS AND BEYOND: WOMEN WRITERS FROM MING THROUGH QING, edited by Grace S. Fong and Ellen Widmer. *Women and Gender in China Studies*. Leiden: Brill, 2010. 431 pp. \$177.00.

CHINESE WOMEN WRITERS AND THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION, 1905-1948, by Yan Haiping. New York: Routledge, 2006. 299 pp. \$178.00.

WOMEN'S LITERARY FEMINISM IN TWENTIETH CENTURY CHINA, by Amy Dooling. New York: Palgrave, 2005. 273 pp. \$100.00.

The three books above complement each other in their coverage of Chinese women's literary genres from the late fourteenth through the early twentieth century. The authors' theoretical inquiries invite consideration of the following questions: what meaning, if any, might a feminist imagination or approach have in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) eras, early and late Republican China (1911–1948), and beyond? What do these works have in common regarding the resituating of women's literary status, the reclamation of feminine agency, and the empowerment of female subjectivity in China's literary tradition? These books can be considered in dialogue with Western feminism and studies of women's literature through their various critical lenses, whether revisionist, historicist, feminist, or postmodernist. This essay reflects on how the authors assess the balance between women writers' personal trajectories and their collective presence in China's literary history. It also asks whether the authors presuppose a feminine self as the locus of their scholarship.

Repositioning the Inner Quarters

Grace S. Fong and Ellen Widmer's edited collection *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing* provides a comprehensive view of women's literary achievements from these eras in writing poetry, composing and editing anthologies, exploring prosimetrical *tanci*,

and carrying out literary exchanges with their close friends in the inner chambers.¹ The book's eleven chapters are grouped into four parts: "In the Domestic Realm," "Larger Horizons: Editing and Its Implications," "Beyond Prescribed Roles," and "The Personal is Political: Responding to the Outside World." At issue throughout is the theme of shifting historical and literary paradigms, with their ideological implications and constraints as well as the polemical relationship of such paradigms to individual and collective power. Researchers of the Ming and Qing eras have found abundant examples of women's works that question or renegotiate prevailing literary and cultural paradigms. The essays in this book reveal an elite female literary culture that shows evidence of a process of becoming and, as Maureen Robertson notes in her conclusion, of transforming, utilizing women's marginalized literary status as a "site for realizing the potential of historical change" (p. 382).

In part 1, "In the Domestic Realm," Fong contributes a chapter on writing and illness in the context of women's poetry. Using the Ming-Qing Women's Writings database of materials held at the Harvard-Yenching Library, she traces representations of women's experiences of illness, which function as "a prelude and even a pretext to writing" (p. 19). "Poems written about, during, and after illness" suggest that women of the Ming and Qing periods developed an association between illness and poetic production, using the relatively "public" form of poetry to portray the "private and personal aspects of their experience" (p. 19). Examining illness in seminal anthologies of women's works, Fong suggests that "writing poetry would seem to enable the sick or convalescent subject to appropriate a different temporality, a different rhythm of feeling, and altered modes of perception from those of normative experience" (p. 26). Poetic representation of illness constructs an alternative feminine aesthetic space and "takes on gendered conventions" (p. 33). In the poetry collection *Yongxuelou shigao* (Drafts from Yongxue Tower, author's preface dated 1816), for example, illness allows Gan Lirou (1743–1819) to "experience and write about bodily sensations of a different order" (p. 41). Sickness endows women with emotional intensity, presenting an occasion to transform the domestic realm into an artistic space in which they have access to "a creative or spiritual experience" (p. 43).

Emotional intensity in women's poetry is also a core concept in chapter 2, "Lamenting the Dead: Women's Performance of Grief in Late Imperial China."² Ann E. McLaren offers an insightful study of Ming-Qing women's appropriation of "elaborate bridal laments (*kujia*) and funeral laments (*kusang*)" to "frame their lives in terms of hardship, sickness, and bereavement" (pp. 50, 51). As McLaren suggests, "mourning for the deceased was part of the 'emotional work' of women in Chinese society," serving as "a medium for serious ritual purposes" (p. 50). Through a study

of poems by women in Jiangnan, the southern regions near the Yangzi, she distinguishes between elite women's poetic expressions and the *kusang* practice by lower-class women as a means "to express their grief, filiality, and verbal eloquence, and [to provide] women with a strong ritual role that was relatively unusual given the androcentric nature of China's ritual culture" (p. 61). Ming-Qing literati women's adaptation of mourning rituals in their poetic expressions "laid the foundation for a specifically female mode of mourning within the poetic tradition" (p. 62). Their appropriation and refashioning of conventions "enhanced the perceived value of their poetic compositions and ensured their wider circulation in the cult of sentimentality of the late Ming" (p. 77).

The three chapters of part 2, "Larger Horizons: Editing and Its Implications," discuss women's editing and anthologizing poetry. Chapter 3, "Retrieving the Past: Women Editors and Women's Poetry, 1636-1941" by Widmer, considers "six collections of women's writings by women editors that came out between the late Ming and the end of the Republican period" (p. 81). The comparison of these works illustrates the interconnectedness of women's literary traditions in these periods, revealing that even in the Republican period some women editors valued classical poetic traditions. Widmer discusses the following editors, listed chronologically: Shen Yixiu (1590-1635), Wang Duanshu (1621-ca. 1685), Yun Zhu (1771-1833), Shen Shanbao (1808-1862), and in the Republican period, Shan Shili (1858-1945) and Xian Yuqing (1895-1965). Showing how they contributed to a feminine literary tradition developed from and sustained by dynastic and early modern women's literary anthologies, this informative chapter makes an important advancement in the study of women's editing practices.

While Widmer's research captures a panoramic view of women's collections across centuries, Robyn Hamilton's "The Unseen Hand: Contextualizing Luo Qilan and Her Anthologies" studies one prominent female anthologist. Luo Qilan (1755-1813) assembled two anthologies of literary writings by more than one hundred authors from southern China: a women's anthology, *Tingqiuxuan guizhong tongren ji* (Poems to the Tingqiu Studio from my companions in women's quarters) and a men's anthology, *Tingqiuxuan zengyan* (Poems of tribute to the Tingqiu Studio), both published in the late eighteenth century (p. 109). Hamilton rightly notes that Luo's publication of the women's anthology provided "a vehicle for lesser known poets to gain exposure" (particularly her female friends), while also endorsing "her prestige as an editor of published works" (pp. 109, 110). The chapter traces Luo's geographical, familial, and social contexts, as well as her spiritual bond with male and female colleagues, mentors, and peer authors. Whereas Luo's selection of authors largely reflects her personal preferences, the order and arrangement of the selected female

poets occasionally might have been influenced by the social prominence of their male relatives (p. 129). Also, Luo's anthologies illuminated women authors' claims on familial and social propriety, as well as their insistence on prioritizing their identities as filial daughters and/or loyal wives over their identities as poets. Such prioritizing suggests that these governing-class women viewed their artistry in the context of orthodox modes of gender propriety (pp. 139-40).

Chapter 5, "From Private Life to Public Performances: The Constituted Memory and (Re)Writings of the Early-Qing Woman Wu Zongai" by Wei Hua, examines publications of the legendary poet Wu Zongai (1650-1674), who committed suicide when she was captured to marry a rebel commander in exchange for her home county's safety. Wu Zongai's life, which fell into obscurity after her death, was excavated more than a century later by a local official, Wu Tingkang (1799-after 1881). In order to advocate for her virtue and moral power, he published her poetry and invited scholars to compose the deceased heroine's life story or portray her in a drama. Hua argues that "the reasons for which [Wu Zongai] was recovered, remembered, and rewritten had much more to do with the socio-historical context of the late Qing than her own poetic merit" (p. 143). Literati scholars venerated her "as a virtuous wife who could serve as a moral example . . . during times of imperial crisis—first the Opium War (1839-1842), and then the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864)—by virtue of her 'choice' of self-sacrifice for her country" (p. 143). Hua insightfully argues that the reconstruction of Wu Zongai as part of a social memory of the late Qing engaged her in a "public performance" that addressed and fulfilled the role of a virtuous woman (p. 171). Hua's investigation of this prominent case shows "how male literati participation in the editing, rewriting, and transmission of women's works in late imperial China was largely implicated in their own networks of male friendship and self-expressive needs" (p. 172). Through studying three editions of Wu Zongai's poetry, Hua offers a meaningful analysis of the tensions and discrepancies between her published text and its accompanying paratexts, including added biochronologies, historical narratives by scholars and military officials, and didactic or interpretative commentaries, all of which sought to shape the reader's imagination of her life and feminine virtue through a reinscribing of gendered identity.

Ming-Qing women's roles, however, could also change, as some women, in real life or in the poetic realm, crossed the boundaries between the inner chamber and the external world. Among the three chapters comprising part 3 of the collection, Wai-ye Li's "Women Writers and Gender Boundaries during the Ming-Qing Transition" explores "poetry about witnessing, understanding, and remembering" the Ming-Qing transition. Such poetry "transforms or goes beyond the boudoir as subject matter," sug-

gesting women's transformation of traditional identities at the juncture of history and politics (p. 179). During this transitional era, male Ming loyalists strategically defined themselves as "remnant subjects" to display their political proclivity in resistance against the Manchurian Qing regime (p. 179). Women loyalist poets, such as Xu Can (1610-1678) and the wife of Chen Zhilin (1605-1666), took on the subjective position of "female remnant subject" (*nü yimin*), which situated them "beyond gender-specific virtues" (p. 180). Through a close reading of poems by Liu Shu (born around 1620), Liu Rushi (1617-1664), Gu Zhenli (1624-after 1685), and Zhou Qiong (mid-seventeenth century), Li explores women's newly developed emphasis on political, intellectual, and spiritual common ground. Their "discontent with gender roles sometimes became the precondition for, as well as a consequence of, political engagement" (p. 179). Li holds that these writers could be considered as the "poet-historians" of the Ming-Qing transition period, "whose poetic self-definition is realized in witnessing, remembering, and understanding the momentous changes and challenges that China faced at critical junctures" (p. 213).

Chapter 7, "Chan Friends: Poetic Exchanges between Gentry Women and Buddhist Nuns in Seventeenth-Century China," by Beata Grant, explores how poetic exchanges between Buddhist nuns and women in the inner chamber produced a "complex intertwining of the political, the aesthetic and the religious" (p. 219). Grant has discovered textual evidence that literati women of the seventeenth century developed friendships with nuns, linked by their "parallel worlds of enclosure" (p. 218). Such friendship allowed women to go "across the boundary . . . between the inner and outer, religious and lay," to search for advice, sympathetic support, and poetic enlightenment (p. 225). Cloistered women also turned to the Buddhist faith to overcome trauma and personal suffering or to achieve a dimension of spiritual transcendence.

In Chapter 8, "War, Violence, and the Metaphor of Blood in *Tanci* Narratives by Women Authors," Siao-chen Hu, a renowned specialist in the genre of *tanci*, offers an in-depth reading of the images of blood in a voluminous work of this genre. *Tanci*, in Hu's words, "can be thought of as the feminine counterpart to *xiaoshuo* (vernacular fiction) in late imperial China" (p. 250). Although it originated in oral performance, literary *tanci* was a written narrative form, laid out in prosimetrical, seven-character lines, and often produced at the length of novels. Ming-Qing women authors, largely from the elite class, developed this narrative tradition into a unique medium of feminine expression of loyalty, filiality, and heroic aspirations. Hu examines *Liuhuameng* (Dream of the pomegranate flower), written around 1841 by Li Guiyu (early nineteenth century), which in its rendering of war and the metaphor of blood foregrounds a woman writer's understanding of "the emotional impact of love . . . in the context of

battles” (p. 279). She insightfully argues that in late imperial women’s *tanci*, war appears mostly as “an allegory for love,” mediated through the imagery of “bloodshed” (p. 280).

These essays share an effort to reclaim the legacy of Ming and Qing women’s literature with its potent impact on *fin-de-siècle* feminist cultural trends in early twentieth-century China, as well as on the New Woman cultural phenomena of the early Republican Period.³ Several chapters in the anthology, particularly 9 through 11, consider this proleptic vision in late imperial women’s literature. Susan Mann’s contribution clearly and powerfully illustrates how nineteenth-century Chinese women’s poems “anticipate the writings of ‘new women’ with whom they shared a common political awareness” (p. 285). In “The Lady and the State: Women’s Writings in Times of Trouble during the Nineteenth Century,” Mann investigates the representation of the female political subject and women’s “astute cognizance” of socio-political issues “beyond the women’s quarters” (p. 283). Reading their politically fraught poetic tropes, she proposes that women’s writings about political issues and social events answered “the statecraft concerns of prominent officials and comment[ed] on social problems that drew the attention of activist literati” (p. 285). These nineteenth-century authors expressed “a political consciousness” through “the plight of refugees,” while images of war, female militancy, and sacrifice were also important indicators of political engagement (p. 301). Such female political consciousness, however, remained less known before the end of the nineteenth century because “women’s poems on troubled times were not readily available to anthologists or readers” (pp. 310-11). Mann further proposes to distinguish between “women who lived through the Taiping Rebellion” in the lower Yangzi homeland and those who had no experience of this traumatic incident (p. 313). Provisionally, she states that there are historical connections between the former group of women authors and the later New Woman of the early twentieth century (p. 313).

Mann’s focus on women’s representation of the “nation-state” resonates in chapter 10, “Imagining History and the State: Fujian *Guixiu* (Genteel Ladies) at Home and on the Road.” Guotong Li investigates “women’s poetic production . . . in late imperial China from the perspectives of space and place, conceptions of the body politic, and identities,” proposing that the local identities represented by Fujian female authors demonstrate their reinvention of literary and moral models from didactic books (p. 318). Historical evidence of the traveling gentry class of women shows that these elite authors “had already come into a consciousness of ties to the imperial state—the political community outside the border of Fujian”—through literary reinvention of local sceneries, sojourns and returns, and kin networks (p. 338). This awareness of contributing to “a larger political community”

of the state, beyond their native place, suggests the impetus of “women’s ‘political’ consciousness prior to the origin and spread of nationalism” in late imperial and early twentieth-century China (p. 338).

The long-lasting development of dynastic women’s literature in the modern period is highlighted in chapter 11, “Xue Shaohui and Her Poetic Chronicle of Late Qing Reforms,” where Nanxiu Qian offers a valuable study of late Qing elite women’s efforts to “adapt their poetic expressions to contemporary ideas and sentiments” (p. 341). Xue Shaohui, due to her exposure to the polemical political landscape of the late Qing, was able to “[expand] her poetic themes beyond life in the inner chamber” (p. 341). Through her husband and her brother-in-law, both of whom studied in China’s first naval academy and traveled to Europe as diplomats, Xue gained access to knowledge of the world from their depictions of foreign lifestyles and the gifts her husband brought to her (p. 342). Later, Xue herself participated in “the 1897-1898 campaign for women’s education,” which marked her transformation “into a public intellectual” (p. 351). Her emphasis on women’s poetry as a focus and vehicle of women’s education refutes late Qing reformists’ criticism of traditional women’s literature as lacking in engagement with social and national concerns (p. 353). Defending the efficacy of the Ming-Qing talented women’s tradition, Xue insisted that “the Chinese system of educating women . . . should receive the same amount of attention as the Western system” (p. 353).⁴ Qian also suggests that Xue’s portrayal of gentry women’s experiences during the Boxer Rebellion reflects a reconceptualization of traditional feminine virtues, thanks to her writing about women’s lives in other cultures (p. 366).

In a revisionist stance toward paradigms of old and new, modern and premodern, the editors of *The Inner Quarters and Beyond* argue that Ming-Qing women’s writings problematize the relation of women’s writing practices to Confucian gender ideology. These writings also suggest that women’s poetry and other genres already show the process of becoming in the Ming and Qing eras, while they anticipate the New Woman paradigms that emerged and prevailed in the twentieth century. Robertson’s conclusion, which offers an insightful reading of Ming-Qing women’s writing as a minority literature, provides a meaningful critical intervention. She argues, “The reality of the disparity of men’s and women’s personal political power is evident in the long period of what might be called tutelage that women experienced as authors” (p. 384). Drawing on the French philosophers Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Robertson proposes a repositioning of Ming-Qing women’s writing community as “minor,” for “from their minor position . . . writers may access a kind of freedom to ‘become,’ and in that process precipitate innovation, difference, and change within both the minor and the major” (p. 386). Robertson’s argument carries particular

importance in this anthology, for it invites a contextualized theoretical inquiry involving current Western philosophical debates on feminist minoritarian literature and on the positioning of Chinese women's writings in relation to new interpretations of literary feminisms.

Women's Literature and Feminist Passaging

While Fong and Widmer's essay collection attends to late imperial women's reinvention of writing spaces in and beyond the inner chambers, Yan Haiping explores how a feminist imagination was shaped and reconfigured by the national imperatives of "becoming modern" when China was in the midst of urgent social and national crises at the *fin-de-siècle* (p. 1). The year 1900 marked an era of enormous turmoil and transformation in China; this historical backdrop profoundly affected protofeminist cultural trends in China and women's narrative practices. Yan situates her book between 1905 and 1948 and lays out seven chapters covering prominent female authors in each decade.

Chapters 1 and 2 analyze the feminist revolutionary Qiu Jin (1875-1907), who studied in Japan and returned to China to support the cause of women's education and freedom but who was tragically betrayed and beheaded during an attempt to overthrow the late Qing government. Yan argues that Qiu Jin's life serves as an exemplar of a "nationalist feminist" in a polemical and turbulent time (p. 46). For Qiu Jin, "feminist passaging" is a journey driven by a longing for and an orientation to one's "homeplace," which is the word that Yan chooses to "translate the Chinese word 'jia'" (pp. 46, 48). Qiu Jin's voyage into the modern world represents the late imperial trend of elite women studying abroad to gain knowledge and freedom. These female pioneers expressed their sense of placelessness and a paradoxical longing for a homeplace, which in Yan's words implies "the spatial sense and social sphere of belonging" (p. 48). In Qiu Jin's vision, young male elite intellectuals' pursuit of modern ideas with an eye to refashioning the old Chinese social order entailed pitfalls for women, yielding "abortive" results for their pursuit of freedom and democracy (p. 55). She instead "envisioned a modern China with a historically ruptured female body as its impetus and leverage" (p. 58). This China would advocate for women's embodied desires and political endeavors.

Chapter 3, "The Stars of Night: Bing Xin and the Literary Constellation of the 1920s," considers the May Fourth New Cultural Movement (1919-1925), whose advocates marked it as an intellectual turning point in modern China's history.⁵ Yan acknowledges that the "discursive features of those early May Fourth women's writings registered in a range of concepts such as 'equality,' 'co-education,' and 'women's rights'" (p. 70). However, she focuses on unraveling the "mutually engendering, precipitating, and

transforming” relationship between women’s writing and the world in which they lived (p. 70). The subject of the chapter, Bing Xin (original name Xie Bingying, 1906-2000), a poet, fiction writer, and essayist, became well known in 1921 after publishing poems and short stories that eulogized “motherly love” as a source of hope, motivation, and creativity (p. 70). Some male intellectuals criticized the theme of motherly love for its “lack of broader social concerns” (p. 72), but Yan suggests that this theme implies “a mode of mapping the world and enabling its human relations” in order to invoke “symbiotic feelings” for the young, the economically impoverished, and the politically manipulated (p. 80).⁶ Yan proposes that Bing Xin’s literary style particularly endeavored to establish a dialogic relationship with her contemporary readers, achieving a form of “co-authorship” by encompassing readers’ anticipations of alternative realities (p. 85). Yan’s chapter, resonant with Bing Xin’s first poetry collection *Stars* (1923), illuminates the historical scene in which Chinese women, women’s writing, and their real life situations contributed to “a female-bodied constellation,” prefiguring a broad horizon of feminine identity (p. 98).

The uncertain state of women’s writing took on new complexities after China’s First National Revolution (1924-1927), which led to the extermination of feudal lords in the Great North Expedition launched by the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party in the south. Against the background of revolution and the ensuing White Terror period of the Jiang Jieshi government in Nanjing, women revolutionaries were subjected to “double erasure” and oppression (p. 101). Chapter 4 explores the “Other Life” of activist female authors of this period, particularly Bai Wei (1894-1987) and Yüan Changying (1894-1973), especially their social dramas of the late 1920s and 1930s (p. 100). Bai Wei’s theatrical portrayals of women’s disempowerment suggest a female “ethical passage” of finding new life in and through death (p. 109). The works of Yüan Changying, on the other hand, depict female characters whose “gendered condition” does not “by definition lead to feminist desires” or perspectives (p. 117). Rather, the playwright’s displaced, hysterical, or abject characters could only submit to the socially inscribed destinies imposed upon them, becoming marginalized in the process of modernization. Citing Yuan’s autobiographical writings, Yan’s chapter concludes with a query on modern culture, which, though freeing women from “brutality,” does not exempt them from other forms of violence and oppression (p. 133).

Chapter 5, “War, Death, and the Art of Existence: Mobile Women in the 1940s,” examines the fiction writers Xiao Hong (1911-1942) and Wang Ying (1913-1974). Xiao Hong’s works “Qier” (Abandoned child, 1933) and *Shengsi chang* (The field of life and death, 1935) foreground a feminine “imaginative landscape as a site of mobile kinship and homeplace” for the weak and socially disenfranchised, including rural women who battle

for their daily existence (p. 139). In Yan's view, Xiao's quest for feminine existence and her desire to escape desolation originate from "her lifelong yearning for an alternative land" that sustains mobility and offers a form of "life-giving kinship" (p. 148). Akin to Xiao's vision of "alternative humanity," Wang Ying insists that the imaginary impulse in literature and art is required to "activat[e] the latent potential" for social transformations (p. 153). Yan argues that Wang's stardom, both as a "noted writer and one of the most prominent stage and screen women performers in the 1930s and 1940s," produced multilayered meanings that unsettled the social categories of "modern," "Chinese," "famous," "professional," and "woman" (p. 153). Wang's work and life projected an alternative model of femininity that evoked controversies at home and abroad.

The search for alternative homeplaces in the 1930s and 1940s is exemplified in the life of the eminent fiction writer Ding Ling, to whom Yan dedicates the last two chapters of her book. Ding Ling (original name Jiang Bingzhi, 1904-1986) rose to literary fame during the May Fourth movement and remained a prominent writer in China's long twentieth century. In comparison with lives in the preceding generation of women activists, her life represents an "emblematic breakage" from the old way of life represented by her "gentry-class household" and an aspiration for change in China's early Republican period (p. 169). For Ding, feminist passaging implied working through her silence "in darkness" by writing and by confronting the predicament of a traumatic era (p. 170).⁷ Yan has rightly stated that Ding's literary career manifests a transition corresponding to her feminist passaging (p. 171). Her early period represents a historical era after the failure of the 1927 revolution, when the author's writings (mostly based in the metropolis of Shanghai) embodied a "gender-specific and female-levered 'struggle to live against and on the edge of death' in the brutal [political] climate" (p. 199).⁸ Ding's late period refers to her reemergence in the literary world after she escaped from imprisonment by the Kuo Ming Tang party and found political support and protection in Yan'An, Shaanxi province, where the Communist Party leaders resided. She was soon appointed head of the All China Association in Arts and Literature (p. 202). In the new political environment of the 1940s, Ding reached a revolutionary turning point in her career and produced many short stories and novels in light of a new politics of art.

In her second acting attempt at the Yan'An Communist base, a place drastically different from Shanghai, Ding took on new political roles, transforming herself from a *petit-bourgeois* urban writer to an activist writer, organizer, and performer (p. 204). Performing new roles onstage and reinventing her offstage personae at the same time, she devoted herself to "the making and practice of a revolutionary humanity" (p. 209). This change

ironically also brought complexity to her representation of onstage female characters, conveying women's underlying political anxiety when they are endowed with "revolutionary agency" (p. 210). Yan powerfully argues that Ding's literary depictions of suffering females, including rural women, have deepened women's fury against injustice into imaginative loci for the empowerment of modern humanity.⁹

Rethinking Feminist Literature in Modern China

In comparison with Yan, who seeks to reconfigure a legacy of feminist imagination through a review of seminal modern women authors, Amy Dooling's *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth Century China* studies feminist writing as a social and cultural trend itself in early twentieth-century China. As she argues, "literary women writing from self-consciously anti-patriarchal perspectives . . . reveal a keener, more inventive and imaginative feminist cultural praxis than has previously been analyzed" (p. 8). Yan endeavors to trace a feminist legacy that suggests an "alternative humanity" against the dominant social-political discourse, whereas Dooling emphasizes reevaluating the achievements of women authors who renegotiate their contemporary patriarchal culture from within. A feminist legacy, for her, is profoundly related to "envisioning women as agents of historical change" (p. 64). Women's literary feminism, prefigured by late Qing protofeminist thoughts, thus needs to be assessed through "the evolving relationship between feminism and women's narrative practices," as well as through the ambivalent political tendencies of those texts (p. 9).¹⁰

Dooling's book addresses the relationship between feminist ideology and literary women in the early Maoist era, focusing on a series of historical interludes constitutive of the core stages of literary feminism in China. Throughout, she resists essentializing "feminist writing" as "women's writing" or writing by women (p. 11), arguing (through reference to Rita Felski) that "an understanding of [feminist] literature(s) cannot be sought in a fixed notion of 'feminist aesthetics'" (p. 13). Rather, one should discuss how dominant cultures may actually open up spaces for dissonance and opposition and how feminist political intervention should be assessed "in terms of its engagement with language and narrative as important battlegrounds in resisting male authority" (p. 15).

With this central question of what Marge Piercy calls "a language of feminism," the first chapter, "National Imaginaries: Feminist Fantasies at the Turn of the Century," examines China's "nascent elite feminist movement," including the late Qing feminist press and their "new lexicon articulating women's incipient identity as national subjects" (pp. 35, 36, 39). Dooling rightly suggests that neologisms in *fin-de-siècle* feminist literature illuminate sexual difference and women's inferior status, such as "the darkness of the

women's world (*nüjie zhi hei'an*); the slaves of slaves (*nuli zhi nuli*); gender discrimination (*nanzun nübei*); separate spheres (*nanwai nünei*); . . . [and] gender equality (*nannü pingdeng*)" (p. 39). Dooling suggests that the "proliferating narratives of national women in the [late Qing] women's press . . . feature[d] the afflictions of wives and mothers, daughterly rebellions against the patriarchal domestic sphere, and struggles for self-fulfillment beyond conventionally appointed feminine roles" (p. 39). Simultaneously these early feminist texts featured "a self-conscious effort to inscribe a new kind of reading position" to address feminine readership (p. 39). Dooling is particularly interested in the production of feminist fantasies in women authors' works, such as Wang Miaoru's *Nüyuhua* (Flowers in the female prison, 1904) and Qiu Jin's *Jingweishi* (Stones of the Jingwei bird, 1905). These works, she argues, show how early modern feminists, rather than merely "serv[ing] the nationalist agenda of radical male intelligentsia, . . . constructed their own narratives of patriotic feminist emancipation, and in the process, significantly altered the plot of the 'story' of Chinese national transformation" (p. 43). Her approach resonates with what Susan Lanser calls a "feminist narratology," centering on uniting women's writings, feminist viewpoints, and discussions of the gender question in analyses of women's narratives.¹¹

Two important questions underlie Dooling's theoretical inquiry in chapter 2, "The New Woman's Women," which focuses on "the phenomenon of the *xin nüxing* . . . , or New Women," and "their impact on the social, political, and cultural landscapes of 1920s and 1930s China" (p. 65). First, "how successful were the New Women writers themselves in devising, and revising, rhetorical strategies to carry out a realist critique of contemporary patriarchal culture without reproducing the masculinist logic that usurps the image of women for its own interests?" (p. 74). Second, "is it possible, finally, to understand Chinese women not only as discursive constructs or textual configurations but also as active producers of stories and histories of their own making?" (p. 6). Dooling's reading of the narrative strategies by women authors focuses on how these strategies are applied to resist and modify the May Fourth male authors' "objectifying mode" of . . . narrative," which is conditioned by male consciousness and misrepresents the feminine image (p. 71).¹² This misrepresentation includes the portrayal of traditional Chinese women as "visually fetishized object[s]" (p. 72).¹³ As Dooling incisively argues, even in men's positive representations of New Women, there can be evidence of "the masculinism that may lurk, in the form of 'residues of traditional representation' behind even the seemingly most enlightened and sympathetic narratives of the modern woman" (p. 73). Resonant in her argument are profound concerns about the relationship between aesthetics and gender politics, the need to deconstruct the opposition between the

two, and the emerging urgency of reconceiving women authors' narrative art in resistance to male modernist intellectuals' analytical position.

Dooling's approach to May Fourth women authors' literary achievements is reminiscent of feminist interpretations of Western authors, like Teresa Winterhalter's analysis of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938), whose "aesthetic surface . . . can be understood . . . to purposefully enact a moral position to which she is deeply committed."¹⁴ Narrative style is "not merely a characteristic of expression or rhetorical flourish but . . . the very motive for writing itself" (p. 237). For Winterhalter, what is at issue in the question of narrative style is how a writer "manipulates authorial voice to explore the relationship between narrative and political authority" (p. 239). Authorial voice is particularly important for the study of early twentieth-century women's diaries and autobiographical writings, whose representations of feminine consciousness have not received sufficient critical attention from the women's male contemporaries. Such gender-specific literary practices also point to the fact that modern Chinese women authors endeavored to reach for political ends different from those of their male contemporaries.

Chapter 3, "Love and/or Revolution? Fictions of the Feminine Self in the 1930s Cultural Left," examines the genre of autobiography as "a conscious reclamation" of female "self and private experience," making the personal dimension of women's lives "relevant subject matter for revolutionary writing" (p. 104). While responding to existing criticism of women writers' autobiographical tendencies, Dooling proposes that such writings utilize "the politics of [autobiographical] form" to respond to "the cultural fascination . . . with the so-called New Women" and rearticulate the feminine experience (p. 109). Through a thorough analysis of female cultural leftist authors such as Bai Wei, Guan Lu (1907-1982), and Xie Bingying (Bing Xin), Dooling proposes that these authors are committed to "(re)politicizing women's personal, subjective experience" while dismantling the synchronic presence of "revolutionary politics and traditional modes of patriarchy" (p. 115). Questioning the characteristic narrative mode of "female/feminist awakening" in modern literature, she finds through her analysis of Bai Wei's writings that social demolition of hegemony could not eliminate women's "self-alienation and disorientation" (p. 134).

Chapter 4 focuses on feminist strategies of coping with social reality through mockery and laughter, particularly during the Shanghai Occupation period (1937-1945). This focus is aptly captured in the chapter title "Outwitting Patriarchy: Comic Narrative Strategies in the Works of Yang Jiang, Su Qing, and Zhang Ailing." Whereas laughter was used by playwright Bai Wei in her theatrical works to address "the female subject's problematic relationship to language itself," for popular women writers

Yang Jiang (born 1911), Su Qing (1914-1982), and Zhang Ailing (English name Eileen Chang, 1920-1995), laughter serves as a tool of social satire, a critique of modern gender relations, or a mockery of modern love and marriage ironized by the historical backdrop of China's national crisis (p. 137). Yang Jiang, famous playwright and wife to the great novelist Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998), utilizes her feminist comedy of manners to put forward a skeptical view of the modern discourse of female emancipation. For novelist Su Qing, author of the autobiographical novel *Jiehun shinian* (Ten years of marriage, 1944), comic and playful "subversion of . . . the prevalent genre of female autobiography" foregrounds an "acknowledgment of [female] sexual desire," while deriding "contemporary gender roles assigned to both men and women as scripts" (pp. 155, 161, 163). The last author covered in the chapter is the famous Shanghai-based fiction writer Zhang Ailing, whose comic reversal of the ancient romance in the fictional setting of semi-colonial China at the threshold of the Sino-Japanese War privileges the satisfaction of her heroine's desire over social transformation. As shown in her novella *Qingcheng zhi lian* (Love that fells a city, 1943), feminine sexual desire is even granted at the price of social upheaval. Dooling concludes the chapter by suggesting it is at times of great social disorder that feminist imaginations are liberated and that "new feminine scripts could emerge in life and in literature" (p. 169).

The last chapter, "A World Still to Win," addresses women's literature as reconfigured by the demands of the "New China" after 1949 (p. 171). Whereas China's "feminist literary imagination languished with the advent and consolidation of Communist rule," Dooling insists on the importance of making connections between the revolutionary past and contemporary understandings of the "feminist strain" of literature and activism in the post-1949 era (pp. 171, 172). She does so by acknowledging how "state feminism" advocated by Fulian (All-China Women's Federation) and Fulian's sponsored literary creativities differ from feminist writings of previous decades (p. 172). Whereas Fulian's promotion of egalitarianism is reminiscent of early feminists such as Qiu Jin, Fulian's "dominant egalitarian rhetoric about gender" provided women only with the option to transform themselves in order to better serve the needs of the state, making them "paradoxically, disempowered women" (p. 175). Dooling then examines post-liberation popular literature that narrativized the New China's "Marriage Law" and represented the Communist Party as the "*deus ex machina* that arrives to rescue the victimized [woman] from her plight" (p. 182). However, several prominent leftist writers of this time, including Chen Xuezhao (1906-1991), Wang Ying (1915-1974), and Yang Gang (1905-1957), resorted to portraying the experience of women in the context of revolutionary change (p. 186). By "emplot[ting] recent history and past personal experience," these authors "complicate the official account

of *Women and the Revolution*” (p. 186). The chapter closes by reiterating that these postliberation women’s writings, along with works of their feminist predecessors, contribute to an “important alternative narrative” of modern Chinese women and their literary tradition (p. 200).

With her interrogation of women’s agency, particularly its place in the building of a literary tradition, Dooling shares approaches and concerns with Yan, Fong, and Widmer, in that all three books assess women as marginalized figures who can be viewed as sources of empowerment, deconstructing “implied power relationships between the male and female sexes” (Yan, p. 3).¹⁵ For Fong, Widmer, and their anthologized authors, this question leads to a way of establishing the feminist literary tradition as a “minority literature,” an argumentative stance reminiscent of what Pelagia Goulimari has termed “a minoritarian feminism” in feminist philosophical studies.¹⁶ For Yan, likewise, Chinese women’s writings exemplify how “the imaginative empowerment of the prescribed powerless and their counterparts in actual life dialogically inform, engender, and underlie one another throughout the history of the modern Chinese women’s social movement and their literary writings” (pp. 8-9). Yan considers women’s collective agency to be sprung from an empowering imagination rooted in a Chinese revolutionary feminist legacy represented by the late Qing female reformist and martyr Qiu Jin. Fong and Widmer argue that as early as the Ming and Qing dynasties, women’s literary practices had already carried the impetus for the flourishing of profeminist and nationalistic thought in early twentieth-century China. Dooling focuses on a reassessment of female authorial practices within and outside of the texts, as well as the fraught relationship between female intellectuals and China’s historical change. The authors of the three books project a shared concern with what Judith Butler calls an ability to “deriv[e] agency from the very power regimes which constitute us, and which we oppose.”¹⁷ This challenging process of finding agency involves not only reworking historicity as such. Rather, as Butler puts, “agency is implicated in what it opposes, that ‘emancipation’ will never be the transcendence of power” (p. 137).

In reviewing the books by Yan, Dooling, and Fong and Widmer, one may find several core questions underlying the study of Chinese women’s literature. What kind of historical viewpoints does each author inhabit? How do they negotiate with and respond to each other? How do these studies revitalize our understandings of place? From Ming-Qing women authors’ renegotiation of the inner and outer spatial relations, to Dooling’s examination of women’s appropriation of nationhood for social self-reinvention, to Yan’s mobile understanding of border-crossing and transcultural feminist passaging, the three books share an effort to redraw the discursive boundaries between traditionally gendered spaces, viewpoints, and socio-cultural positions. The focus is not so much on presenting or rediscovering the feminine

literary tradition as a counternarrative to dominant patriarchal norms, but rather on representing the dynamic vitality of women's writings in China to surpass discursive inscriptions and containments, find resources for renewal and survival, transform critical paradigms, and offer new insights into women's agency and power. The social, cultural, and political valences of these selected texts speak to feminist criticism on a broader historical terrain and give rise to new insights for a self-reflexive, ethically sound, critical perspective in interpreting Chinese women's literary tradition.

Women's Writings versus Feminist Legacy

Together these three books call attention to the ambivalent relation between literary feminism and women's writing in late imperial and modern China.¹⁸ The contested distinction between women-centered writing by women and feminism is a well-saturated theme in Western feminist studies. Asking whether women's novels are feminist novels, Rosalind Coward suggests the more crucial question is "whether the 'representativeness' which these novels claim is simply a reflection of 'feminist consciousness,' or a propaganda device towards such a consciousness, or whether we have to be more cautious in analysing their structure and effects."¹⁹ Ultimately, it is only "by paying attention to [women's] practices of writing, conventions of genre, and their relation to other forms of writing, that we can differentiate between novels and assess their political effects" (p. 61).

In the context of China, such concerns are even more complicated because the term "feminism" has often been interpreted as a product of theoretical translation that may impose inaccurate paradigms on Chinese women's literary tradition. According to Kwok-kan Tam, Chinese equivalents for "feminism" include several terms. One is *nüquan zhuyi*, which literally means "women's-rights/power-ism" and emphasizes women's equal rights with men; the other is *nüxing zhuyi*, which means "an ism of femaleness," emphasizes women's gender difference.²⁰ Both terms were applied in the context of modern China's construct of women as social and national subjects since the early twentieth century. The term *nüquan zhuyi* carries the risk of reducing feminism to a mere movement for women's rights and social power and "an antagonism to male power" (p. xvii). This interpretation also renders *nüquan zhuyi* as a potential "threat" to male authority and leads modern male intellectuals to be "worried about the rise of a new female consciousness" (p. xviii). The term *nüxing zhuyi*, which has been used since the 1990s, suggests a corrective shift to feminine sexuality and gender-related issues away from Maoist nationalist discourse in the context of the rise of China's self-acclaimed feminist scholars who are trained in Western theory but choose to search for a locally situated definition of feminism and femininity.²¹

These contentions about Chinese feminism have not been fully covered in the selected books here, but they draw attention to the self-reflective impetus of these authors' investigations of female-oriented literary traditions. For Fong and Widmer, the resituating of Ming-Qing women's writing in the history of Chinese literature means not only a "rediscovery" of women's texts, but also a reconsideration of the histories that "women themselves recorded of their words and actions, of their emotions and life experiences" (p. 2). The editors and authors in the collection have addressed the study of women's extant writing, especially what Robertson calls "the 'writerly' character of this body of texts and its voices" (p. 379). Fong and Widmer's collection shares common interest with Dooling, who focuses on assessing the important role of women's voice and narrative authority. One notable difference between the two books, however, is that Dooling claims an approach to women's literature as evidence of China's literary feminism, whereas Fong and Widmer, along with their contributing authors, argue that women's writing in the Ming and Qing eras foreshadowed or provided proleptic narrative evidence for feminist literary explorations of gender and national discourses in the ensuing twentieth century.

Although Dooling and Yan both use the terms "feminism" and "feminist imaginations" to address twentieth-century Chinese women's writings, there are myriad differences in the books' structures and theoretical trajectories. Echoing her title, *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905-1948*, Yan gives the chapters suggestive titles taken from the writings of the authors being discussed, such as "Unseen Rhythms, Sea Changes," "Qiu Jin and Her Imaginary," "The Stars of Night," "Other Life," "War, Death, and the Art of Existence," and "Rhythms of the Unreal." The fluid structure of her book presents feminist imagination as "an active energy that does not constitute material reality" (p. 8). Yan holds that women's writings are linked to what Hannah Arendt calls "the unclassifiable ones," writing that "neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification" (p. 11).²² The figurative chapter titles derived from women authors' own words suggest the literary soil that nurtures the development of twentieth-century feminist cultural trends.

According to Yan, such structural innovation also is made to "revisit a Chinese revolutionary feminist legacy through an encounter with a group of seminal twentieth-century Chinese women writers at the point of intersection of their print works and life passages" (p. 1). Central to her approach is an endeavor to understand the modernity of women authors through a study of how their lives and writings "disclose, inform and alter each other" (p. 171). Yan's use of the term "revolutionary" in stating the empowering effect of feminist imagination here is an endeavor not so much to impose a Hegelian interpretation of the evolution of Chinese

feminist consciousness, but rather to highlight women's collective movement toward a homeplace of their own. Yan is similar to Fong and Widmer in concluding that the personal is political, be those persons late imperial women who reconfigured the notion of state prior to modernist constellations of the term, or the modern writer Bing Xin whose portrayal of "motherly love" designates the female body as the very site in which feminine social existence is enacted. In this light, Fong, Widmer, and Yan all address the feminist initiative of mapping the development of the personal in the passages of a life in the making, whether their subjects are late Qing female traveling poets, reformers, or early twentieth-century women authors who write from their experiences of border-crossing sojourns.

Like Yan, Dooling offers a historically contextualized review of Chinese women's literature in the modern period. Her attention to "sexual-textual politics" complicates and counteracts a reduction of feminist literature to its opposition to the external sociopolitical order (p. 4). She also shifts readers' concentration to "how a given feminist writer devises strategies of intervention in her own representation of 'reality'" (p. 17). The theme of gender and textual politics in itself is not a "modern" concept and is also keenly manifested in China's pre-twentieth-century women's literature. For example, in her study of the Qing women's poetry anthology *Guochao guixiu: Zhengshi ji* (Correct beginnings: Women's poetry of our dynasty, published in the Daoguang reign from 1821 to 1850) and its sequel, Li Xiaorong proposes that the female scholar-poet Yun Zhu (1771-1833) "strove to celebrate" the authorship of gentry women and that poetry served as "a means for direct self-presentation as well as a reflection on moral principles and their lives as women."²³ As a result, poetic anthologies by women "[construct] a poetic space" in which women have access to appropriate discursive power "even within the limits imposed by their society" (p. 107).²⁴ Both Dooling and Li Xiaorong show an interest in distinguishing between gendered viewpoints, which, as Elaine Showalter articulates, contributes to a discrepancy between "feminist critiques" focusing on women's reading of male texts and "gynocriticism" centering on women's reading of female texts.²⁵ In regard to the textuality of feminine writing, as Widmer argues in her conclusion, whether late imperial women chose literary means as authors or "non-literary" means "as painters, embroiderers, or performers of mourning rituals," they encountered the same set of issues concerning feminine self-representation (p. 390). Such inquiries illuminate the key tasks entailed in shaping a Chinese feminist poetics: to locate or relocate gender represented in traditional literary concerns, to negotiate the places and possibilities of women authors and their readership, and to develop an altered aesthetic space of women's "intellectual and political freedom via writing and speeches."²⁶

It is thus noteworthy to compare the three books' visions. Fong and Widmer's book, aptly titled *The Inner Quarters and Beyond*, reflects a motion of moving from women's experience of writing within the domestic realm to their spatial awareness of cultural and political geographies (the nation-state), their responses to the outside world at times of war and national crisis, their mediation between domestic and external boundaries, and their prescribed roles through poetic exchange and traveling. In parallel to this outward and forward looking trajectory, the theoretical position of the book envisions a spatial "return" from the marginal to the "center," which implies the reclamation of women's poetic achievement within canonical traditions, as well as the reemerging presence of pre-twentieth-century women's literature on the horizon of women and gender studies in modern China and the broader global context.

Dooling's book unravels how feminist writing, after departing from the utopian trajectory of the late imperial period, shifts its focus to the stark ongoing processes of creating alternative realities for modern Chinese women. The aesthetic value of women's writing is prominently demonstrated through the proximity of the literary text and the author's lived experiences, between embodied authorial space and its exhibition site, and through the larger socio-political terrain that profoundly conditions literary practices. The building of a feminist aesthetic space for Dooling consists of addressing the feminine experiences marginalized by cultural traditions, expanding the content of the male-defined realist literary aesthetics, and defying dominant stereotypes of women. One may conceive of her approach as one of spatializing women's narrative. Spatiality, rather than temporality, as a focus of critical reading practices, according to Susan Stanford Friedman, is particularly appropriate to women's texts: "Spatialization emphasizes the psychodynamic, interactive, and situational nature of narrative processes; it also provides a fluid, relational approach that connects text and context, writer and reader."²⁷ In Dooling's view, the multidimensional textuality of women's narrative draws attention to the textual and political incoherencies and ambivalences that defy preconceived parameters, highlighting the relationality of female subjectivity as a theoretical construct.

Yan's book carries an analogous vein of thought on the spatialization of modern women's narratives, both in analyzing the stylistic features of autobiographical writings and life narratives and in situating the state of Chinese women in the early twentieth century as "caught up in a historical confluence of violent fluidity" (p. 13). The feminine subject here is often a border-crossing figure, en route and in transit. Modern feminine writing accordingly manifests a degree of placelessness, a forced mobility caused by displacement, as shown by early twentieth-century female intellectuals such as female revolutionary Qiu Jin and Republican playwrights Bai Wei

and Yuan Changying, who studied abroad and then returned to China to pursue their literary careers. Yan conceptualizes a feminist aesthetics based on the process through which women, who were denied social spaces for themselves, departed from their “natural places” to become travelers, writers, publishers, and social activists. As exemplified in the life and writing of Ding Ling, the modern woman’s tales and life in China suggest “an immense legacy of a ravished humanity struggling for survival that inherently challenges and finally bursts her bioethnic ‘destiny’” (p. 9). Aligning feminist literary modernity to the “empowerment of a powerless humanity,” Yan envisions women’s feminist imagination as an energy that could surmount women’s immobility and marginality (p. 9).²⁸ She frequently uses rich spatial metaphors including “sea,” “imaginary,” “stars of night,” and “other life” to project an altered or altering feminist spatial aesthetics, which seek to unite the past with the present, to resituate past women authors among today’s readers as participating members of reality.

Epilogue

Several questions covered by the above authors deserve more deliberation. The notion of “difference,” which in *The Inner Quarters and Beyond* characterized the visibility and productivity of late imperial women writers, carries profound theoretical implications in the field of gender and women’s studies. If “difference,” as understood by Deleuze and Guattari, serves as a sharable theoretical paradigm from postcolonial studies, such a theoretical move also engages a comprehensive discussion of contemporary feminist appropriation and contestation of the concept of “difference” and “minor literature” in the context of pre-modern China. One should also consider the book’s own critical intention in applying such concepts. Could the idea of “minority literature” liberate the study of women’s writings from certain restrictions or constraints imposed by “feminist” inquiries without risking “degendering” women’s literature itself? Does “minority literature” provide a broader vision of women’s literary achievement than feminist literature? Feminism in itself should not be interpreted as only a post-twentieth-century (or post-imperial) concept, just as the concept of postcolonialism is not exclusively Western or Eastern. What other terms could be used to better represent theoretical concepts in the context of late imperial women’s writing? If Ming-Qing women’s writing anticipated and paved the way for later feminist cultural trends, through what examples are the long-term effects of these earlier trends manifested? The term “anticipation” also raises the question of whether/how such “anticipation” carries original authorial intentions or reflects later critics’ retrospective analyses. From the editors’ perspective, can this anticipatory historical gaze lead to a dialogue with later literary feminism, and what is the long-projected impact

of finding this anticipated historical connection between the pre-twentieth century and the twentieth century?

The anthology leads to an open-ended vision of women's literary writing from Ming *through* Qing, provoking readers to think beyond the inner chambers. The principal genre covered in the chapters is poetry, as well as elite women's activities related to poetry collecting, editing, anthologizing, and exchange, partially because women's authorship was largely and successfully represented by governing-class authors. Hu Siao-Chen's chapter covers prosimetrical *tanci*, or chantefable narratives written by gentry women authors, which could be considered a subgenre of fiction. Wei Hua's study discusses both Wu Zongai's poetry collections and the play that staged her as a heroine. McLaren's study of *kusang* poems opens windows to future studies of women's folk songs in the lamenting tradition by lower class and rural women. These chapters add to the breadth of the covered literary materials in the anthology, suggesting the multiplicity of late imperial women's stylistic choices. Aside from poetry, other genres such as chronicles, travelogues, folk narratives, fiction, drama, and songs collectively contribute to the notion of "Ming-Qing Women's Literature." These dynasties witnessed not only a flourishing of women's classical poetry, but also women's endeavors to write with less canonical genres. These efforts, which guaranteed them more freedom, could contribute to the editors' inquiry about women's literature as "minor literature."²⁹

Fong and Widmer focus on gentry women's poetic expressions in the Ming-Qing periods, whereas Dooling and Yan cover mostly women's fiction, drama, and autobiographical writings in the modern era. The apparent difference in their attention to genre triggers a deeper question about gender representation and women's choices of the genre in which they write within various historical contexts.³⁰ To address these less explored genres is not merely to adopt a reflective critical stance of avoiding essentializing feminine literature or literary feminism, whether modern or imperial, or of preventing remarginalization of less acknowledged women's writings. It also invokes a serious inquiry into why and how certain genres were chosen or preferred for the expression of the feminine, by whom, and for what purposes. In a broader understanding, the question of genre in feminist studies refers to the structures of discourse and social power, featuring the actual processes through which these structures are enacted at the individual level. It is by finding an effective way of speech that a woman author's voice can be heard and acknowledged as intelligible.

Another key question is the role of translation in the development of Chinese women's literary history. As stated above, the term "feminism" has been subjected to multiple processes of translation in modern China. Modern China's feminist writings drew their resources from the translation of foreign texts, and Chinese feminism was deeply engendered by the

translated Western texts advocated by the late Qing reformers. In the early twentieth century, Dooling rightly points out,

partially fuelling the contemporary production of discourse on the New Woman's sexuality was the burst of translation of Western and Japanese texts, both nonfiction and fiction, as New Culturalists increasingly turned away from the domestic textual tradition in their search for a fresh vantage point from which to carry out their social critique. (p. 69)

Scholars Wang Zheng and Dorothy Ko argue that “feminism” remained a contested and pluralistic concept throughout modern and contemporary China, while “translated feminisms” conversely “transformed the terms in which modern Chinese understand their own subjectivities and histories.”³¹ Carol C. Chin argues that for readers and scholars today, China's feminism or feminist imagination is also subjected to “Chinese women's conceptions of *modernity*” as ideological “representation,” their understandings of gender politics and the underlying systems of power relations, and the changing social, historical, and intellectual context from late Qing radical feminist activism to contemporary feminist movements.³² Whereas the feminist inheritance between the late Qing and Republican periods is extensively studied, more scholarship needs to be conducted to address the wide gap between these prefiguring feminist trends and translations of Western feminism into Chinese after the Cultural Revolution.

The books reviewed here breathe energy into global feminist discourse by bringing in local histories and writings of feminism. The translations of feminist terms serve to shore up discontinuity, ruptures, and absences within discursive processes. As Ko and Wang argue, terms such as *nüquan* (women's rights/power) have mirrored China's long political history since the late nineteenth century, a process in which women's pursuit of equality and political rights was “implicated in a problematic nationalistic scheme from the start” (p. 466). Another prominent example, *funü wenti* (the woman question), is a term originating in late Qing feminism in which activists advocated for women's rights in marriage, education, work, and participation in socio-political affairs. Whereas such concerns remain unresolved for many women in today's China, the “woman question” is expanded to include the impact of globalization, resistance against gender-sameness resulting from the Communist Party's gender politics, and a pressing need to endorse indigenous feminist trends in the global terrain.³³ Chinese feminist scholar Li Xiaojiang, for example, resorts to translating her own works from Chinese into English to counteract the supplementary differences imposed on her writings by the process of translation.³⁴ In addition, Li, though a trained Marxist feminist, turned to the traditional Chinese concept of *yin* and *yang* for a localized understanding of gender difference, which she first proposed in her book *Xing Gou* (Sex gap). Li's

contemporaries, Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua, advocate the presence of a Chinese feminist trend that should “emerge from the horizon of history,” as their book title aptly puts it: *Fuchu lishi dibiao* (Emerging onto the horizon of history). Such “return” of less explored women’s literature to critical attention is profoundly conditioned by translation practices. In contemporary women’s studies, as Laura Stevens states, translation of women’s texts could play a crucial role in global feminist studies, which demonstrates a keen interest in “mak[ing] non-Anglophone languages and literatures slightly more visible and audible by attending to some translations of them.”³⁵ Translation, Stevens argues, is “a crucial form of intellectual labor that should be the subject of analysis, assessment, and feminist critique” (p. 11). These examples illustrate that translation of feminism and women’s writings in general is a discursive process involving the multiple historical backgrounds of texts translated, textual gaps and ambivalences, appropriative interpretations of such ambivalences created through the translation, and the translators’ gendered, political, and social perceptions.

NOTES

¹ *Tanci*, which literally means “plucking rhymes,” include the following two categories: the orally performed, seven-character liberatto that has been popular in the southern Yangzi River area for centuries, and the prosimetrical narrative genre written in rhymed lines composed chiefly for reading. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, elite women in China transformed this popular narrative form to describe new or imaginary feminine identities. Women’s *tanci* depict heroines who serve as repositories of women’s self-consciousness about moral propriety and imagine women’s unconventional lives in and beyond the inner chambers as cross-dressed scholars, female warriors, Daoist immortals, or even eminent ministers. At the turn of the twentieth century, some progressive male authors also took up the *tanci* form to write shorter tales of heroic women in China and the West. However, these male-authored *tanci* tales portray feminine heroism as a reflection of male intellectuals’ own political ideals about China’s nation and society and are very different from traditional *tanci* fiction by women.

² The late imperial era in Chinese history refers to the dynasties of Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911).

³ The New Woman is a cultural figure in Republican China (1911-1948) who challenges women’s prescribed gender roles and suggests the transformation of Chinese women from backward or bourgeois to a new form of subjectivity. The image represents the necessity for the transformation of China into a new nation. See Sarah E. Stevens, “Figuring Modernity: The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China,” *National Women’s Studies Association Journal*, 15, No. 3 (2003), 82-103; and Jin Feng, *The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2004).

⁴ The Ming and Qing dynasties witnessed an expansion of women’s education and the increasing visibility of active woman writers. The development of women’s

literary activity was especially marked in the Jiangnan regions around the lower reaches of the Yangzi River. The women authors of this period were recognized as *Guixiu* writers, or talented writers of the inner chambers. The so-called *gui* refers to the inner quarters where women resided in the domestic compound. In the late imperial period, educated gentry women transformed the inner chamber into a unique space that valorized women's voices. In this space, the dominant male literary discourse did not have absolute control. In the context of women's flourishing literary activities, the acutely interior quarters harbored multiple possibilities of new feminine existence. For a discussion of the trope of the inner chambers and women's exploration of it as a space of poetic self-expression, see Xiaorong Li, *Women's Poetry of Late Imperial China: Transforming the Inner Chambers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012).

⁵ The New Culture Movement refers to China's intellectual changes from the mid-1910s to the 1920s. In *China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949* (New York: Routledge, 2005), Peter Gue Zarrow states, "'New Culture' was in fact a rallying cry for efforts to abolish everything associated with subservience, hierarchy, patriarchy, and decadence" (p. 129). The New Culture movement formed "the basis of a new kind of egalitarian and libertarian politics" and paved the way for the May Fourth movement (p. 129). The May Fourth movement (1919), guided by the call to create "New Literature," prepared for the development of modern Chinese literary realism.

⁶ Yan cites Boqun Fan, ed., *Bing Xin yanjiu ziliao* [Research materials on Bing Xin] (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 1984), 193-418. Yan alludes to criticisms of Bing Xin's portrayal of motherly love as "narrow" (p. 257, n. 16).

⁷ Ding Ling, reflecting on the female revolutionary Xiang Jingyü, who was executed by the Nationalist Regime for her activist endeavors, comments that this violence shocked her into realizing that she was "entirely alone in darkness"; Yan cites Ding's essay "Xiang Jingyü tongzhi liugei wo de yingxiang" [The influence of Xiang Jingyü on me], in *Ding Ling quanji* [Complete collection of works by Ding Ling], vol. 6 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 2001), 25-30.

⁸ Yan states that modern women writers recurrently experienced what Ding Ling called a situation of "living at the edge of death" and by doing so derived insights and power for fashioning nascent forms of selfhood (p. 67); see Ding Ling, "Si zhi ge" [Songs of death], in *Wo zai aiqing zhong shengzhang* [I grow up in love] (Guilin: Lijiang chubanshe, 1988), 87.

⁹ During the Yan'An period of Ding's career, particularly from 1938 to 1940, she was actively involved in grass-roots organizational works for women in the rural areas. This new direction ignited her passion and provided context for her writings of the period, which convey "revolutionary agency" as a major theme (p. 213).

¹⁰ Grace Fong explores the question of agency and women's writing in *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008). Fong proposes that late imperial women authors can be considered 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" (p. 5). The "notion of agency" thus accounts both for "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, [such as] Confucian orthodoxy" (p. 6).

¹¹ Susan Lanser, "Toward a Feminist Narratology," *Style*, 20 (1986), 341-63.

¹² Dooling cites Stephen Chan, "The Language of Despair: Ideological Representation of the 'New Woman' by May Fourth Writers," *Modern Chinese Literature*, 4 (1988), 23.

¹³ Dooling cites Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 107.

¹⁴ Teresa Winterhalter, "'What Else Can I Do But Write?' Discursive Disruption and the Ethics of Style in Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 18, No. 4 (2003), 237. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁵ Yan argues that the "characterization of the weaker-stronger binary as the natural condition of the modern subject formation reveals a social structure that is also a biopolitical economy of desire and sexuality" (p. 3).

¹⁶ Pelagia Goulimari, "A Minoritarian Feminism? Things to Do with Deleuze and Guattari," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 14, No. 2 (1999), 97-120.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, "For a Careful Reading," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 136. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the rise of feminism in China, see Shu-Mei Shih, "Towards an Ethics of Transnational Encounters, or 'When' Does a 'Chinese' Woman Become a 'Feminist'?", *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 13, No. 2 (2002), 90-126.

¹⁹ Rosalind Coward, "'This Novel Changes Lives': Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels? A Response to Rebecca O'Rourke's Article 'Summer Reading,'" *Feminist Review*, 5 (1980), 58. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²⁰ Kwok-kan Tam, "Feminism and Gender Discourse in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong," introduction to *Gender, Discourse, and the Self in Literature: Issues in Mainland China*, ed. Kwok-kan Tam and Terry Siu-han Yip (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2010), xvii. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²¹ Key works during this period representing the rise of China's feminist criticism include Xiaojiang Li's *Xing Gou* [Sex gap] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1989); and Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua's book *Fuchu lishi dibiao: Xiandai funü wenxue yanjiu* [Emerging onto the horizon of history: A study in modern women's literature] (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1989). Meng and Dai's book was considered to be a theoretical cornerstone for China's feminist criticism, which gained in growth and impact after the Cultural Revolution.

²² Yan cites Hannah Arendt, "Walter Benjamin, 1892-1940," introduction to *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 3.

²³ Li Xiaorong, "Gender and Textual Politics during the Qing Dynasty: The Case of the *Zhengshi ji*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 69 (2009), 76, 107. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²⁴ Kang-I Sun Chang, in an earlier study on Ming-Qing women's poetry anthologies, suggests that "it is through reading and using these *separate*—that is, separate from male authors—anthologies that we can view the 'total history' and

fully appreciate the close relations and interdependence between male and female literary activities"; see Chang, "Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women's Poetry and Their Selection Strategies," in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, ed. Ellen Widmer and Chang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 149. The variety of selection strategies and criteria in anthologies of Ming-Qing women poets reveals a pluralistic literary scene.

²⁵ Elaine Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, Theory*, ed. Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 125-43.

²⁶ Vivian M. May, "Writing the Self into Being: Anna Julia Cooper's Textual Politics," *African American Review*, 43 (2009), 17.

²⁷ Susan Stanford Friedman, "Spatialization: A Strategy for Reading Narrative," *Narrative*, 1 (1993), 19.

²⁸ For analysis of spatial metaphors in feminist studies, see Kerstin W. Shands, *Embracing Space: Spatial Metaphors in Feminist Discourse* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

²⁹ Among current scholarship on Ming-Qing women's fiction and drama, the following resources are of particular importance: Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book: Women and Fiction in Nineteenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006); and Hua Wei and Wang Ailing, eds., *Ming Qing xiqu guoji yantaohui lunwen ji* [Collected papers from the international conference on Ming-Qing drama] (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1998).

³⁰ The question about gender and genre in late Qing and early twentieth-century Chinese women's literature is more centrally explored in Nanxiu Qian, Fong, and Richard Joseph Smith, eds., *Different Worlds of Discourse: Transformations of Gender and Genre in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

³¹ Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng, eds., "Translating Feminisms in China," special issue, *Gender and History*, 18 (2006), 464. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³² Carol C. Chin, "Translating the New Woman: Chinese Feminists View the West, 1905-15," *Gender and History*, 18 (2006), 491.

³³ Recent feminist scholarship in China also offers rich reciprocal reflections on the function of capitalist globalization and its impact on feminist movements. See Su Hong-jun, "A Dangerous Liaison: Theorizing the Relationship between American Second-wave Feminism and the Neo-liberal Capitalist Globalization," *Collection of Women's Studies*, 3 (2013), 5-14.

³⁴ For Li Xiaojiang's reflection on the problems in translating feminist theories, see "Women and Feminism in China and India: A Conversation with Li Xiaojiang," by Mary E. John, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 April 2005, 1594-97.

³⁵ Laura M. Stevens, "On Translation," *Tulsa Studies of Women's Literature*, 30 (2011), 11. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.