Learned and Literary Women in Late Imperial China and Early Modern Europe

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As a feminist scholar engaged in the study of seventeenth-century French literature and culture, I find that looking at the world of learned and literary Chinese women presents both an opportunity and a risk. The opportunity is for cross-cultural comparison on unfamiliar terrain, leading perhaps to a deeper understanding of macro-historical forces shaping female gender. The risk is suggested by Dorothy Ko's essay, which questions the applicability to China of certain Western conceptual frameworks designed to understand events occurring in European history. Undoubtedly this question applies also to Western feminist thinking. A comparison such as I am attempting might therefore turn out to be a nagging reminder that although Eurocentrism is very helpful to understand European history, if one wants to understand China (one of Europe's favorite "others"), one must take the risk of having one's most cherished assumptions shaken.

I believe that comparing a specific group of women (learned and literary women of the upper class) in late imperial China and in early modern Europe makes most sense if we do not confine ourselves to the micro-historical framework of two distinct cultures, but also place these cultures in the conceptual context of the macro-historical framework of patriarchy.¹ I do not suggest that patriarchy is universal, but only that it seems ubiquitous in the historical societies we know. I use the term patriarchy here, not only to designate a system in which men dominate women, but more precisely one in which men exploit women.² In this perspective gender relations can be represented by a vertical structure of power relations in which no doubt is left about who dominates and who is dominated.

¹Gerda Lerner has convincingly drawn a history of patriarchy which challenges the nineteenth-century mythical notions of Engels concerning the advent of the domination of women by men. According to Lerner, it was not an event, or the outcome of a war, as Engels suggested, but a process that took 2500 years, from approximately 3100 to 600 B.C. See Lerner 1986. It would be interesting to see if and how the history of patriarchy she reconstructs is relevant for China.

²See Walby 1986.
Given these premises, the history of women within patriarchy can also be viewed as the history of women's oppositions, tactical struggles and adaptive devices. Viewed in this way, the history of women is no longer the account of development and progress, nor simply the history of victimization (although that element cannot be forgotten). Nor is it the history of a women's culture studied in isolation but the history of the dynamics of strategies of control on the part of the dominant power and of tactics of survival, negotiation, accommodation, opposition or self-affirmation on the part of women. Women's history, thus understood, becomes the history of a relation of power, opposing blocks of power on a horizontal axis; it could thus more properly be renamed the history of gender ideologies and gender relations.

Michel Foucault defines the relation of power in the following manner. First, contrary to the relation of violence which must have been its primitive form, the relation of power is a mode of action which is not exerted directly upon another, but rather upon another's actions: it is an action directed upon or in anticipation of an action. Secondly, the relation of power is non-egalitarian and mobile. Thirdly, the relation of power, although inherent to institutions, should not be confused with them. Fourthly, power can be exerted on a subject only insofar as the latter has a free will, for at the very core of such a relation, power is constantly provoked by the will of the subject opposing it, and the intransigence of freedom on the part of that subject. There is no relation of power without the possibility of escape. Finally, relations of power are constantly linked to strategies of struggle, and constantly subjected to the possibility or the fear of being overthrown. For, if power needs opposition in order to operate, and if it spreads to the social body through these points of opposition, it is also true that it is by these very oppositions that power is upset and maintained in a state of constant disorder.

This notion of the relation of power is further articulated by Michel de Certeau who distinguishes more clearly than Foucault strategies of power from tactics of opposition. De Certeau defines strategy as a manipulation on the part of the dominant power to insinuate itself into the social body or into the smallest recesses of the individual's psyche. A tactic, however, is the maneuver the dominated deploys to counter the effect of the strategy, to oppose dominant power: "A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place [the dominant power], fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance." Needless to say, neither Foucault nor

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3Foucault 1979.
4De Certeau 1984.
5De Certeau 1984: xix.
De Certeau had the relation of power between the sexes in mind; in fact, as theoreticians of power they did not seem to be conscious of gender as a category of social thought, and their work remains remarkably gender-blind. With other feminists, I have appropriated their theorization of power.

I will let my readers decide for themselves if the model of women’s history I am proposing is indeed applicable to China.

**The Place of Women’s Education, Talent and Creativity**

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the education of girls of upper-class families seems to have aroused similar masculine concerns in both China and Europe. Be it in France, England or Italy, some men proposed that women should be educated in order to educate their children properly. Others thought a woman should be educated because an ignorant woman cannot be virtuous. Others on the contrary associated education and creativity in women with promiscuity. Others, finally, contended that women had no use for education, or that they were not capable of true knowledge, or even more, that to educate women would be “unnatural” and tantamount to turning the world upside down. In both cultures, education for women is not seen by men as an end in itself that would serve the purpose of the woman, but as a tool that might reinforce or subvert the established order which men wanted to equate with the “order of things.”

However, Ellen Widmer says that beginning in the late Ming it became routine for wealthy families in the Jiangnan area to educate their daughters. One can certainly not say the same for European women whether in France, England or Italy. From artisans’ families to aristocratic ones, many women learned to write and read, but extremely few were really educated in the sense of being formally taught. The few educated women one finds in the Renaissance and seventeenth century often benefited from the attention of a sonless father or an uncle or else they were self-taught. Other women were not their teachers, least of all their mothers.

Susan Mann says that the eighteenth-century Chinese scholar Zhang Xuecheng was not alone in arguing that men and women have the same innate intellectual gifts; further, he argued, women were privileged because their self-cultivation was not undertaken to carve their place in society or to pass examinations. Educational endeavour for women could be pure, he said, because it was for no external gain. In keeping with the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation, Zhang was indeed giving women some claim to participate in a common morally-elevated inner life.

In Europe women lived in a society which more sharply divided the sacred and secular realms. In the Renaissance context women who pursued “inner”
religious perfection were specifically barred from studying sacred texts. In the secular world, humanist education could not be separated from public roles, making it contradictory for women to pursue it for purely private self-improvement. The few women who undertook such an education were keenly conscious of the conflict between humanist ideals and the norms of their gender. They found themselves in the frustrating situation of being praised for their intellectual achievement by male humanist scholars, while at the same time being barred from the public arena into which this education was meant to lead them. As public figures, they were branded as wanton and unchaste, for according to a humanist consensus a woman of fluent speech is never chaste.

In the letters exchanged between male and female humanists of the Italian Quattrocento, the contradictions inherent in a humanist education for women leads men to confusion and uneasiness and women to puzzlement and frustration. The only outlet some of these humanist women had was to exchange letters with learned men who sometimes protected them, and to publish books that often reveal how, in trying to become successful, they came to embody the self-hatred that their misogynistic humanist education had foisted on them. One striking French exception, in the fifteenth century, was Christine de Pizan. Christine de Pizan, educated by an Italian humanist father, is the first known woman in Europe to have earned a living and great honors through her writings. She was also the first known woman to speak for women in the “Querelle des femmes,” which ought rather to be called in defense of women “Querelle des hommes à propos des femmes.” She exchanged vituperative letters with famous humanists of the time. She also wrote several pieces of fiction, or more properly autobiographical fiction, in which she expresses her anger, her self-justification and her dreams for women.

In both cultures, talent, knowledge and creativity in women seem a very complex issue for men. Ellen Widmer suggests that the great success the story of Xiaoqing had with male literati might express a cultural anxiety on the part of men about educated, literary, or talented women, even as it reflected the expanding outlet at the time for female talents. The same male anxiety is

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7Kelly 1984: 65-109. The “Querelle des femmes” refers to a debate which began among men, mainly clergymen in the Middle Ages, about the essential superiority or the essential inferiority of women. The Roman de la Rose, published in the thirteenth century by two different writers, epitomizes the debate. The first part of the novel, written by Guillaume de Lorris, following the aristocratic courtly tradition idealizes women. The second part, written by Jean de Meung, virulently satirizes women. In the fifteenth century Christine de Pizan was the first woman (but not the last) to add a female voice to this debate.
to be found in early modern Europe, as creative and educated women had to defend themselves against being ridiculed as pedants or accused of lewdness, or even charges of plagiarism. For example, in seventeenth-century France, Madame de Lafayette wrote what is considered to be the first French modern novel, *La Princesse de Clèves*. When she first published the book, she let a male friend sign it because it was not altogether proper for a virtuous woman of the aristocracy to meddle in public art. However, everyone in Paris who read the book knew that she had authored it. For a long time literary historians, who until recently were all men, promoted the idea that Madame de Lafayette had been greatly helped by the man whom she allowed to sign her work.

The theme that talent in women leads to their unhappiness and untimely death is not to be found in early modern Europe. Dorothy Ko relates a story about the answer a mother gave her daughter, who bitterly inquired why Zhang Chayun, a very talented poet, had to die so young: “I think talented men are poor not because Heaven so ordains, but because they are addicted to poetry; talented women die young not because Heaven so ordains, but because they exerted too much effort on their poetry.” While the death of young talented women is not ascribed to a cosmic law by the mother, the answer she gives nevertheless suggests that women’s energy, when put to intellectual or creative use, can be the cause of disorder, insanity or death. This recalls the argument advanced in early modern Europe, according to which women were not to dedicate themselves to intellectual pursuits, because their weak brains could not withstand such pressure. In 1769 a man named Bienville published in France a medical treatise in which he explains that intellectual pursuits might facilitate the development of nymphomania in women, as their weak brains became hot during such pursuits and deranged their organism. It is interesting here to see the old ethical or religious argument, according to which knowledge in women was tantamount to vice, return in the “age of reason” under the guise of medical knowledge, in which vice is transformed into disease. Clearly, this latter opinion sought to reinforce the idea that the gender arrangement of society was a result of essential, biological differences between men and women: the brain for men, the womb for women.

In both China and Europe, the fear of men, when confronted with educated, talented and successful women, is best captured in the two following manifestations. On the European front, humiliation by ridicule and slander seems to have been a much-used weapon. Molière is the most notorious example but not the unique one. In several of his plays, *Les Précieuses ridicules* and *Les Femmes savantes* in particular, his ridicule of learned women was

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8Bienville 1769.
so barbed that Madame de Lambert could write around 1726: “Molière in France has created the same disorder [ridicule for learning] with his comedy *Les Femmes savantes*. Since this time, learning in women has become as shameful as the worst vices.”

Another masculine strategy in Europe was to portray talented women as ugly and as prudes. French literary historians have had more to say about Madeleine de Scudery’s alleged homeliness and prudery than about her very interesting literary production, which advocates the refusal of passion, marriage and childbearing for quite other reasons. In an apparent contrast on the Chinese front, Li Yu’s drama, *Ideal Love Matches*, appears to ridicule men and admire the talented beauty: Yang Yanyou is trapped by the skeptical townspeople into proving that her work was not painted by a man. As she is drawing, members of the male audience praise her beauty and tiny feet. Ellen Widmer notes that the hilarious scene deflects attention from the question of female abilities and reduces their talent to a criterion of marriageability. But this is not all this text reveals. It expresses the deep male anxiety regarding the consequences of education and talent for women. To be educated might lead to questioning the status quo; to be talented might mean that the talented woman indeed possesses the inner freedom necessary for creativity. The talent of women menaces men because it casts doubt on the efficiency of their patriarchal system in stunting women by channeling their energy into the service of men. The sight of the properly bound feet of the painter reassures the men that the woman has been moulded to fit the patriarchal ideal. Consequently they do not even have to look at her work any more, or to be menaced by her talent: “She is perfect in every way; there’s no more to be said.”

We can deconstruct this passage further to learn what footbinding is all about. It is a reassurance that protects men from their fears that their erotic objects might reveal themselves to be subjects after all. The same psychology is at play in Occidental eroticization of women’s body, in which women’s bodies are fragmented into eroticized pieces (buttocks, breasts, ankles, legs, feet in high-heeled shoes). First, reducing women’s bodies to fragmented pieces dehumanizes and makes objects of them. Second, the mark of sexual difference being inscribed in their very body (through the corset, high heels, footbinding, etc.) never lets them forget their place in society as objects.

Dorothy Ko indicates how Chinese women used their education to impart their own reading onto the sacred texts of the classics, to counter men’s arguments that women’s inferior power was inscribed onto the cosmic order of

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9De Lambert 1883.
10The passage of the play I am referring to is quoted in Widmer 1989: 25.
things. Similarly, Christine de Pizan and Marie de Gournay in the seventeenth century reinterpreted the Christian scriptures to women's advantage. Marie de Gournay went further and claimed for women the right to the priesthood which men jealously guarded for themselves.

In spite of these numerous similarities, there appears to be a great difference in many social arrangements affecting men and women of the aristocracy in China and early modern Europe. In Europe men and women did not occupy such sharply demarcated spaces. In Europe only religious women and men were cloistered and separated from each other, and only nuns were totally separated from the world. Although the ideology that divides living space in two, assigning the inner space to women and the outer to men, existed in both cultures, European women made occasional excursions into the mainstream more often than seems to have been the case in China. Surely one can discern in Europe a private sphere assigned to women and a public sphere reserved for men, and one cannot deny the concerted efforts of men to prevent women of all trades from invading or remaining in the public sphere. However, the very fact that men had to deploy strong counterattacks in the guise of laws, slander or ridicule, proves that the demarcation between private sphere and public space presented more flexibility than in China. This flexibility is very relative, however, and further study would be necessary to determine its nature. My guess, at this point, is that the relatively greater opportunities European women enjoyed were not due to the fact that they lived under a more benign form of patriarchy, but rather to contradictions between different blocks of patriarchal power within European society. For example, a girl or a widow could oppose her family and refuse to marry and be supported by the Church which recognized her religious vocation. Or a woman who was barred from any religious power within the hierarchy of the Church because she was thought to be weak and not fit to study theology, could claim charismatic power on the ground that the Scriptures state that the souls of men and women are equal in front of God, or that the grace of God is bestowed on the lowly.

Many of the writers studied by Dorothy Ko seemed to derive much strength from claiming and adhering to the inner sphere. There was no such thing in early modern Europe as a women's literary culture in the sense that is suggested for China here. It is true that many women wrote in what was considered at the time minor genres. But this was a result of their poor education or their marginalization; when they were better educated they often chose to write in genres considered more serious. As several studies have shown, female European writers addressed themselves to a male literary tradition which they often challenged. The sharper gender division in China, due to
the tight conflating of the notions of inner with women and outer with men, might explain why Chinese men could allow female learning. Being so securely ensconced in the inner world, women’s learning and creativity were ineffectual in changing their social or political positions, and therefore threatened less. Because this women’s culture did not compete or mix in the mainstream, but on the contrary upheld the division, men were not only willing but eager to help publish their work. By contrast European women writers derived their strength from stepping out of the private sphere and by disputing their rights to at least a part, if not all, of the public sphere. To write and be published always meant for European women to step in the public sphere and therefore threaten men, even if the content of their work did not question the socio-political sexual arrangement. That might explain why male family members did not play such a crucial role in publishing women. A publisher would publish a woman if he thought he would make money out of her work. Although women might have sought out male intellectual protection, their protectors were not family members.11

Furthermore, the content of women’s writing in Europe often did question the existing sexual arrangement. This was true for Christine de Pizan, or later in the sixteenth century, for Marguerite de Navarre, Louise Labé and Hélisenne de Crenne, but it was most particularly true for aristocratic women writers in seventeenth-century France. These women, who have been labelled “précieuses” by literary historians who wanted to disparage them, were prominent and influential in the milieu of the aristocratic salons, influencing language reform and changes in social sensibilities. They made themselves known also by their harsh criticism of forced marriage and forced childbearing, by opting for singlehood and celibacy in preference to such unions, by their denunciation of male tyranny over women in all domains, and by their demand for equal education for women. In literature as in life, they proposed to replace love and passion with Platonic friendship between the sexes. Some of them demanded the same rights to take lovers as their husbands enjoyed.12 In the creative realm, they made a major contribution to the form and to the themes of the novel. All of this meant a challenge to the division of space into private sphere for women, public sphere for men.

Susan Mann mentions that for Zhang Xuecheng and maybe for other people in China, the integration of women into the world of men’s letters was seen as degrading for women. For Europe the question was not posed exactly in the same way. Because public notoriety was always questionable for women,

11 For a better understanding of sexual politics and ideology in Early Modern Europe and in the Middle Ages see Rose 1986; and Ferguson and Vickers 1986.
12 On the seventeenth-century French salon women see Lougee 1976.
while at the same time being published automatically put them in the public sphere, women writers always had to defend themselves against accusations of lewdness. Many, however, managed to write, to be published and to earn a living from their work while enjoying a good reputation as "honest" women. However, if they defended their honesty too strongly they were called prudes. The concept of "blue stocking" to designate a learned and sexually undesirable, therefore ridiculous, woman, expresses the contradictions women had to live with regarding sexuality, learning and being published.

Also, the network of Chinese literary women does not seem to be a pattern in Europe in general. Women writers in early modern Europe were scattered and often did not read or refer to other women writers, from one century to the next. However, within the same generation, especially starting with the seventeenth century, we see literary women writing admiring letters to each other: for example Anna von Schurman from Holland wrote to Mary de Gournay, praising her feminist pamphlets. Queen Christina of Sweden went to Holland expressly to meet Anna von Schurman, whose learned reputation was far reaching. Also, in France among the aristocratic women writers who created the salon as a locus of literary and intellectual exchange among men and women, Madame de Lafayette, Madame de Sevigné, Madame de Sablé and Madeleine de Scudéry all knew and read each other, and were read in turn by a wide circle. Even if the Chinese model of women's literary network was not prevalent in Europe, in both cultures women seem to have found great solace in female friendships.

Except for religious female writers whose orthodoxy had been closely scrutinized by a male clergy, women writers in Europe do not seem to have been honored as concrete manifestations of communal honor and pride, probably for the reason that writing for a woman meant stepping outside of a place men had assigned her, while in China a woman's writing might still uphold the inner/outer division and therefore be honored for that reason.

Although in China as in Europe there were few social statuses offered to women besides marriage and religion, it seems that in Europe there were more alternatives to marriage. Rich widows could occasionally more freely dispose of themselves and their fortunes and refuse to remarry. Rich widows, who could resist pressure of remarriage, were indeed the most free of all women. This was the case for Christine de Pizan, Madame de Sévigné, Madame de Lafayette and many others. In rare cases, when parents died before a girl was married, she could chose to remain single and enjoy a life of relative freedom, as was the case of Marie de Gournay and Madeleine de Scudéry among others.
The rhetoric of burned manuscripts and books called "scrawls rescued from fire" has its corollary in early modern Europe. However it is found mostly in connection with religious female writers, who were especially obliged to disclaim any desire for fame. From Mechthild of Magdeburg in the early fourteenth century to Jeanne Guyon in the late seventeenth century, religious women subverted the interdiction to write in many different ways. One of their strategies was to claim that they wrote in the transport of ecstasy, but that later, out of humility, they destroyed the product of their inspiration. Or it was said that as they were about to burn their manuscripts, someone in authority intervened and saved them. Marie de l'Incarnation was a mystic in the beginning of the seventeenth century, who wrote numerous letters and several autobiographical accounts which were published by her son soon after her death. Judging from her own statements, her extant writings, which are quite voluminous, would be twice as bulky were it not for her having destroyed a "good portion of them by fire."

According to Ellen Widmer, in spite of an identifiable growth of female literature and publication in Ming-Qing China, the woman's perspective did not enter the mainstream. European female writers by contrast did enter the mainstream and were read and discussed by both men and women at least during their lifetime. Many of them were also paid for their literary production, either from the proceeds of their books or, in some rare cases, through pensions given by the government. However, as Widmer claims was the case for China, women's literary works in Europe were not canonized or passed on to later generations. As the passing on of cultural heritage was solely in the hands of men (publishers, academicians, critics, professors, creators of the canon), past women's work in Europe as in China was either presented in a derogatory manner or forgotten. Relegated to the dusty back shelves of libraries, they remained unread until not long ago when feminist scholars started to look at this heritage.13

In Europe the exceptions to this pattern of neglect were the writers who displayed feminine grace and vulnerability, or whose work mirrored back to men the image they had fabricated of women. These were more readily accepted and even passed on to posterity. Madame de Sévigné, for example, is the only woman who found her way into the textbook "classics" of French literature as early as 1740.14 This "honor" is not solely explained by her talent; other women displayed an equal or even greater talent. Her self-proclaimed

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13 For a good example of the distortions of women writers in the hands of male literary historians see Stanton 1981: 107-34.
14 Viala 1985: 142.
total devotion to motherhood had something to do with it. Likewise, Madame de Maintenon, who wrote pious and reactionary treatises on the education of girls, was served up in the nineteenth century in the curriculum of both religious and lay high schools.\textsuperscript{15} This is all the more surprising considering the strong antipathy that the Third Republic and its lay school system felt for both the Old Regime and the Church.

Finally, Maureen Robertson makes references to the fabrication of literary history, which has always found good reasons, it seems, both in the East and the West, not to include women writers. In the West, however, this exclusion cannot convincingly be explained only by the tradition of "separate spheres," and it is usually justified by the "poor quality" of women's work. However, feminist critics increasingly are showing that women's absence from the canon reflects men's fears of difference and their stake in keeping the status quo, rather than the alleged "poor quality" of women's work.

\textit{Women's Voices}

Dorothy Ko documents quite strongly the forging of a "women's culture inside gentry households in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jiangnan." She interprets the result of her research as a proof of women's creativity and strength without, however, appraising or discriminating among the voices that came out of this culture. She does not assign a meaning to the different women's voices, and key questions thus go unanswered: are these voices a reproduction of orthodoxy, an expression of embitterment and alienation, an accommodation, a resistance, or are they an appropriation of a masculine discourse to serve new feminine ends?

Through her literary analysis of poems written by women, Maureen Robertson is able to differentiate between the woman's voice which mimes the literati-feminine voice and the woman's voice that speaks her own concerns and point of view. In so doing, Robertson does not obliterate the difference between the women writers who represent their own image from a masculine perspective, and those who establish, through different manipulations of the poetic code, a distinctive, feminine voice going beyond the acquisition of the literati-feminine. Indeed, the textual strategies of women writers in Early Modern Europe to speak from their own center are very similar to those highlighted by Professor Robertson's study.\textsuperscript{16}

Ellen Widmer says that one cannot find in this picture of female education and literary output any proto-feminist discourse. A proto-feminist discourse

\textsuperscript{15}Compagnon 1983: 103.
\textsuperscript{16}For an example of poetic strategies women used in order to inscribe their point of view in a masculine poetic tradition, see Jones 1990.
is one which shows consciousness on the part of the author of the unfair
treatment of women and which attributes this unfairness to a usurpation of
power and privilege on the part of men rather than to a divine or "natural"
cause. Several writers in Renaissance and seventeenth-century Europe voiced
strong criticisms against the status quo, and displayed a clear understanding
of the political nature of the gender arrangement prevalent in their society.
Christine de Pizan, Marie de Gournay, the French women writers of the salon
in seventeenth-century France, all engaged in a very open and strong proto-
feminist discourse.\footnote{For English proto-feminists, see Ferguson 1985.}
It seems that in China the very ideology of inner and
outer spheres corresponding to women's and men's world respectively, which
favored education for girls and a flourish of feminine literary output, is also
what allowed men to keep a strong control on that education and that output.
Also, Ellen Widmer mentions that because the men of the family published
their women's literary production, it was not likely that women could use this
means to air their opinions on the gender arrangement of their society.

**Ventriloquism**

Feminist critics have come to designate as ventriloquism the usage that
female writers make of a male literary code, which they manipulate to express
their own concerns. Maureen Robertson gives us good examples of such
manipulation of the poetic code in her analysis of several poems written by
women. However, ventriloquism originally designated the usage that a male
writer makes of a female voice in order to subvert a tradition of his own
culture, as Ovid does in *Heroides* in order to subvert the epic tradition. I
want to address here the issue of male ventriloquism, that is, male writers
expressing themselves through a feminine voice.

Both Susan Mann and Ellen Widmer refer to a venerable male literary
tradition in China, according to which male writers would vent social or po-
itical frustration by using a woman's voice complaining of a woman's plight.
Thus, Xu Shijun talks about political frustration as a major motive behind
his interest in Xiaoqing. In at least two other narrative and dramatic versions,
Xiaoqing is compared to Qu Yuan, the misunderstood political adviser of the
ancient state of Chu. This is interesting on several accounts. Although the
claim that the writing of a particular work of fiction or drama is motivated by
political frustration is so often used in Chinese literature as to be a cliché, as
Mann and Widmer mention, it does shed light on the unconscious motivation
of some European dramatists, who used the same metaphorization without
explaining it. Dramatists such as Racine or Corneille, whose strongest pro-
tagons are often women, do not admit to a metaphorization of a masculine
social or political plight as a woman’s plight; however they have been thus interpreted by several feminist critics. It has been suggested to me that there exists in China a myth which equates a political subject ignored by the ruler to a woman neglected by her lover. This claim on the part of Chinese literary men of ancient times lends credibility to the contemporary feminist critics’ interpretation of European dramatists’ work. It can also explain Flaubert’s enigmatic sentence a propos Madame Bovary: “Madame Bovary c’est moi.” By metaphorizing their own plight through that of a woman, male writers at once divert the attention from the woman’s plight and highlight it. The successes enjoyed by Peony Pavilion and the story of Xiaoqing with both men and women might not stem from the same source. Men might have read these texts as a metaphor of their own plight as courtier (therefore paying no attention to the second term of the metaphor) whereas women probably read them as a literal description of their own plight, while at the same time not being allowed to say so.

Self-consciousness about ventriloquism among Chinese men (or its unconscious use by European men) might point to the fact that men somewhere knew that women’s plight was political and social and had to do with men’s exploitation rather than being inscribed in the order of things.

Widmer mentions also that male literati composing poetry in the literati-feminine voice chose erotic themes. In Europe men also composed erotica in which the narrator is a naive, victimized woman with no will of her own, who describes what men’s pleasure inflicts on her, as in Sade’s narrative, or further, who enjoys it, as in The Story of O. The Story of O, very much in the vein of the eighteenth-century infamous Marquis de Sade, is an erotic sado-masochistic tale of female debasement and humiliation narrated by a woman who enjoys it, and was written by a man who signed it under a woman’s name. This authorial transvestism reveals the confusion that can take place between men’s desire, men’s prescription of women’s desire and women’s mimicry of men’s desire. The only thing left out is actual women’s feeling and experience of desire and sexuality.

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The very sketchy comparison I have made regarding the creativity of women in China and Europe at the same historical period suggests that a common project between social and literary historians of both cultures is not only possible, but could lead to fertile development in gender studies, in

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18 For example see Bruneau 1986.
19 Wainhouse and Seaver 1966.
20 Réage 1965.
the history of women, and in the history of patriarchy. What stands out in this comparative overview are the similarities. Specifically, what strikes me is how, in spite of historical and cultural differences and unequal opportunities, the strategies of Chinese women were similar to strategies employed by their counterparts at the same time in Europe; how men's fears concerning women come back, again and again, as a stubborn obstinato; and how men's devices to keep women in the place assigned them resemble each other. The differences are differences in degree. One might make an overall comment that Chinese patriarchy seems to have presented fewer internal contradictions than its European counterpart, thus presenting less space for maneuvering for Chinese women than European women had. One might argue that although both systems inscribed their mark of domination onto the very body of women through the corset or footbinding, footbinding was more severe because, after all, one is able to take the corset off at night. However, when one considers the witch-burning and tortures committed by male clergy, the horrendous self-lacerations and psychosomatic manifestations of women saints who had internalized the violence done to women, and the treatment of the female hysterics by the male medical profession in the nineteenth century, one might be forced to recognize that the Western world does not pale in comparison to the Orient in its inventions to subdue the female sex.

I would like to finish on a word of caution addressed to historians of women in general. There is a tendency among some historians of women in early modern Europe to apply uncritically a Foucaultian model of power struggle. Echoing this tendency Dorothy Ko writes:

To conceive of woman as victim or even rebel is to focus attention on vertical and often supposedly static structures of power or dependency. But in reality, power relations are dynamic processes, hence multivalent, shifting and open to manipulation.

In my opinion, the horizontal model does not supercede the vertical model of power relations. If we eliminate the first model of power relations when dealing with gender struggle, we run the risk of giving an equal strength to all blocks of power, thus hiding the fact that, as far as women are concerned,

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1While it is true that in the Christian ideal self-effacement and suffering are advocated for both sexes, historical studies of charismatic movements, which flourished from the thirteenth century and which went into decline in the seventeenth century, indicate that self-mutilation, mortification of the flesh and self-sacrifice for the greater glory of God were practiced almost entirely, although not exclusively, by women. Hagiographic literature underlines the importance of suffering and of the gift of the self more heavily for women than for men. See Bynum 1982 and 1987; Bell 1985; and Kieckhefer 1984.

2Didi-Huberman 1982.
patriarchy is a power that underlies all other systems of power. In dealing with women's history, we must keep in mind that even if it can be described as the history of tactics of survival, transgression or opposition, or sometimes of conformity, one cannot forget that this very struggle is determined by a dominant patriarchal ideology, be it in Europe or in China, and that the very subjectivity of women is shaped by it, although in my opinion not entirely contained by it.

Another point, with which I shall conclude, is that historians of women sometimes tend to eulogize women of the past. It has become unfashionable in women's history to view women as victims. I very well understand the wishes behind this dislike. Scholars of women's history not only desire to modify accepted views by historians, they also want to valorize women's production and lives, their creativity in using the options that were available to them, and their ingenuity in manipulating a hostile world to their advantage. However, our desire to create or vindicate a past for women, and the emphasis we put on women's self-empowerment in a patriarchal system such as seventeenth-century China or Europe, might lead us to lose sight of the price women had to pay for a modicum of self-empowerment. It is understandable that women were willing to pay a high price for whatever meaning they could give to their lives, for giving meaning to one's life is what makes it worth living or dying for. However, this very desire to give meaning to their lives with whatever was available, also explains their complicity with the very system which alienates them.\textsuperscript{23} We know that women received enormous rewards for supporting the very system which oppressed them, and also that many died for not doing so. I also have been made to understand that there is an additional problem one faces in Chinese studies, namely the desire to wash away the European gaze which for centuries has provoked misunderstandings and distortions of Chinese society. This concern is as legitimate as that of women's historians who want to wash away from women's history the stigma of victimization. But pushed to their limits, these two problems which compound one another might make us end up extolling an oppressive order and lure us once more into believing that a young talented woman who writes an erotic poem about bound feet and dies at sixteen is indeed celebrating a women's tradition of her own, without ourselves questioning this tradition. To see women as mere victims is not inadequate; it is insufficient. To study women's culture without questioning the values that contain it, and women's desire without analyzing the unconscious forces that shape it, is also insufficient. A more accurate

\textsuperscript{23}The problem of complicity or consent of the oppressed is not an easy one to deal with and should not imply a moral blame. For a strong analysis of the problem see Mathieu 1989: 3-49 and 1990: 51-90.
picture lies somewhere between the two.

References


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