



Women's Poetry of Late Imperial China

TRANSFORMING THE INNER CHAMBERS

Xiaorong Li



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This book is dedicated to my grandmother Wang Dongmei (1911–2010), who raised me. She did not have the opportunity to receive a formal education and remained illiterate throughout her life, but she was profoundly cultured and had a big heart.

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Women's Poetry of Late Imperial China

Introduction

On a spring day in 1929, Hu Shi (1891–1962), one of the most prominent writers and scholars of twentieth-century China, was at home examining a comprehensive catalog of Qing women’s writings edited by Shan Shili (1863–1945). Despite his amazement at the sheer number of women poets recorded in the catalog, Hu Shi wrote a preface in which he came to this stunning conclusion: “In my opinion, the literary achievement of women in the past three hundred years is indeed poor, and most of their writings are worthless.” The reason, he suggested, is that most of the texts in Shan Shili’s catalog are poetry on the theme of women’s activities in the inner chambers.¹ As a cultural giant of the May Fourth Movement, Hu Shi was intolerant of old literature that did not accord with his new cultural agendas. His sweeping critique of women’s poetry of the recent past may have been partially responsible for its marginalization in the modern compilation of Chinese literary history.² It was not until the past two decades, more than half a century after Hu’s comments, that exciting scholarship on women’s literary practice in late imperial China (ca. 1600–1900) began to emerge. Informed by feminist and other critical agendas, social and literary historians have striven to rediscover women’s texts and to show their significance in providing new perspectives on the lives of women authors and the recent Chinese literary past. It turns out that the previously invisible and silenced female half of society was actually an active cultural community whose achievement is far from “poor.”³

In reevaluating the texts, however, we cannot simply dismiss Hu Shi’s low opinion; instead, we should inquire into the reasons for his

opinion and take them into account when developing critical models. Hu Shi's glimpse into Qing women's writings, though impressionistic and oversimplified, does have a certain degree of evidential support. First of all, the poetic genre is by default the one in which women were most active. Furthermore, the shared features of their poetry are indeed striking: from similar thematic choices and styles, to recurrent images, to the fact that many of these poems are related to women's lives in the inner chambers. The recurrence of certain themes and patterns is not unique to women's texts but has been often discussed in literary criticism dealing with originality and imitation or intertextuality.⁴ However, in developing critical models for women's writings, one should ask: What are the important ways in which women participate in literary practice as a socially and culturally determined group? How should we interpret distinct features pertaining to women's texts? To what extent should we recognize gender difference in literature by women?

This book addresses these critical issues by tracing the development of the *gui*, meaning the boudoir or the inner chambers, topos over the three hundred years identified by Hu Shi—a period that witnessed the most significant developments in late imperial Chinese women's writings. The period covers the last decades of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the entire Qing (1644–1911), and the early years of the Republic (1911–49). Whereas Hu Shi overlooked the subtle and new meanings that women authors attached to the *gui* and ultimately dismissed their poetry on the *gui* as “worthless,” the *gui* elucidates and was fundamental to a dynamic poetics that brings into relief recurrent themes, motifs, and imagery pertaining to women's texts, sheds light on the levels of mediation of women's textual production by the literary tradition as well as ideological and sociohistorical conditions, and serves as a measure of their creativity in expanding conventional poetic space.

During the late imperial period, women continued to be consigned to the *gui* by Confucian social and gender norms. Most of the women writers in this time were from elite families who were observant of the principle of sex segregation and able to afford the expense of accommodating female family members in the inner chambers. Consignment to the *gui* influenced women as both social and writing subjects. The *gui* not only was a physically and socially bounded location within which women were supposed to live but also constituted a discursive space in which both men and women articulated their ideas

about gender, sexuality, femininity, and women's subjectivities. It became a significant determinant in women's approaches to representing their gendered positions and experiences in the late imperial period and beyond.

Social historians such as Dorothy Ko and Susan Mann have shown the complex ways in which women both depended on and negotiated their gender boundaries in cultivating a distinctive women's culture.⁵ Women's interaction with the multileveled conception of the *gui*, however, has not yet been closely examined from the standpoint of women's literary production. In their pioneering studies, literary historians such as Maureen Robertson and Grace S. Fong have offered important theoretical insights into women writers' negotiation with conventional poetics in the *shi* and *ci* genres.⁶ The boudoir as a conventional setting in feminine poetics underlies their analysis, and both authors offer many insights on which this study can draw, but neither focuses on the conception of the *gui* itself.⁷

Although the parameters of women's poetry are not signified only by the *gui*, by making it a focus and framing device, this study identifies a core area in which to examine women's connections to and the innovations they introduced to preexisting feminine poetic tradition. Women poets in late imperial China constructed a poetics that simultaneously was within the tradition and derived from their subjective positions and perspectives. Although the framework of the *gui* does not supersede other "particularized gendered subformations," with its multiple significations associated with female gender, it is crucial for our understanding of the distinctive poetics of women who were active writers during this period.⁸

THE *GUI*: THE NORMATIVE GENDER LOCATION

The Chinese character *gui* etymologically means "the small gate of the inner courtyard, palace, or city."⁹ It is most often used in combination with other elements to form a range of words associated with the inner apartments, space, or sphere, such as *guige* (inner chambers), *guikun* (inner quarters), and *guifang* (bedrooms).¹⁰ Moreover, due to its association with inwardness, it has long been associated with the female gender. By the late imperial period, the term *gui* had come to embrace a nexus of meanings: the physical space of the women's chambers, a defining social boundary for the roles and place of women, and a spatial topos evoking feminine beauty and pathos in

the literary imagination. All of these meanings are crucial to the concerns of this study. While the Chinese term *gui* may be used in an inclusive and general sense, depending on the context, “the inner chambers” is a more abstract and broader concept that refers generally to the space of the inner or domestic sphere to which women were supposed to belong and “the boudoir” represents an even more private and narrower space composed of women’s apartments in the inner chambers, that is, the bedrooms and dressing rooms.

The consignment of women to the inner chambers originated from the ideal of physically and socially separating the sexes. The recognized, earliest source of this idea is the Confucian ritual and ethical classic the *Book of Rites* (Li ji), dating to the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), which notes: “While men live in the outer, women live in the inner sphere.” It goes on to say, “From the age of seven, a boy and a girl would not sit together or share a meal.” A boy “from the age of ten would seek instructions from an outside teacher,” but “a girl from the age of ten should not go outside.”¹¹ The section “Regulations for the Inner Sphere” (Nei ze) in the *Book of Rites* goes further, elaborating on the behavior codes of sex segregation. These principles were repeatedly quoted verbatim or rephrased in the moral instructions of later ages. The *Analects for Women* (Nü lunyu) by the palace woman Song Ruozhao of the Tang (618–907), for example, rephrases the idea stated in “Regulations for the Inner Sphere”: “Inner and outer, each has its place. Males and females gather separately. Women do not peek outside the walls nor step into the outer courtyard. If they go out, they must cover their faces. If they do peek, they conceal their forms.”¹² Another influential source reiterating the separation of spheres is “Miscellaneous Proprieties for Managing the Family” (Zhi jia), by Sima Guang (1019–1086). This work is considered a signpost of the Song dynasty’s (960–1279) increasing attention to gender distinction associated with spatial terms.¹³

The idea of gender separation was supposed to be not only embodied with physical boundaries but also extended to the division of labor. Men were supposed to be in charge of social and public affairs, whereas women were called to mind domestic matters. As the *Book of Rites* emphasizes, “Men should not discuss affairs of the inner sphere; women should not discuss affairs of the outer sphere.”¹⁴ Presuming the separate spheres between males and females, the Han classic *Precepts for Women* (Nü jie), by Ban Zhao, provides specific codes by which women were to conduct themselves in the domestic sphere.¹⁵

The above-mentioned moral instructions, among others, were recognized as orthodox sources on gender division in late imperial society. Elite men and women drew on these sources to construct the cultural ideal of the segregated women's quarters and female propriety. Together, *Precepts for Women*, *Instructions for the Inner Quarters* (Neixun), by the Ming Empress Xu, *Analects for Women*, and the *Record of Female Exemplars* (Nüfan jielu), by Wang Jiefu (Chaste Woman Wang) of the Ming, constituted the so-called Four Books for Women (Nü sishu), a standard curriculum of didactic texts for women established by the late Ming.¹⁶ These books were recognized as the quintessential works on normative womanhood and were "required reading for the daughters of all upper-class families."¹⁷ Despite different emphases and temporal origins, these moral classics clearly set forth the separate spheres—male: outside, female: inside.

The ideal material expression of these ethical principles was a Chinese house built to provide "the physical frame of women's lives and [give] concrete form to the separation of men's and women's domains."¹⁸ The women's sphere was located within the inner quarters. Enclosed by high walls, the house ensured that women were kept out of public view. As a girl grew up in such a house, she learned about her proper place and roles within society. The Chinese house was not merely a shelter made of materials but also "a cultural template": it was a learning device, a space imprinted with ritual as well as political and social messages.¹⁹

There is little evidence that these ideological principles were put into practice, but there is evidence of the elite's insistence on gender distinction in everyday life. A father of five daughters and a believer in the ethical values espoused by the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism, Chen Hongmou (1696–1771), compiled *Inherited Guide for My Daughters* (Jiaonü yigui) in 1742 in order to instruct the women in his family on their proper roles and daily conduct.²⁰ In his guide, he sees women's major role as managing the household in order to ensure the prosperity and propriety of the patrilineal family. In addition to the old doctrines of sexual segregation, he gives the women of the house specific pieces of advice such as: "If women do not know how to cook and do not enter the kitchen, they cannot effectively manage the household; if women are enabled to make companions and form clubs, showing their bodies and faces in public, they cannot order the household."²¹ Chen's book was widely recognized and reprinted repeatedly during the Qing and Republican periods.²² But his was only

one among many expressing similar views. Female seclusion was always the first and foremost concern of “household instructions” (*jia xun*), a practical genre established in the mid-Ming.²³ Gender distinction had become a core belief by the mid-Qing.²⁴

However, drawing on different sources, new trends in historical studies have uncovered shifts of consciousness and discrepancies between reality and ideal principles, especially in the late Ming. Through an examination of the sixteenth-century manual *Regulations for the Inner Chambers* (Gui fan), by the late Ming scholar-official Lü Kun (1536–1618), Joanna F. Handlin illustrates a more sympathetic and pragmatic approach to women’s moral issues in a changing society.²⁵ Dorothy Ko’s article on women of the Clear Brook Poetry Club indicates that women from the gentry class also crossed gender boundaries in their literary interaction with a male teacher and leader.²⁶ In her book *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, Ko further theorizes a female literary culture based on an expanding women’s sphere in the fluid society of seventeenth-century Jiangnan.

From various perspectives, scholars have painted two different pictures of women’s relations to the gendered domain of the *gui*, both of which are supported by strong evidence and arguments. Their divergent points of view reveal the complexity of the issue. A better position from which to discuss it may be found by taking into account both visions of gender boundaries associated with the *gui* and revisiting Lü Kun’s thoughts about women in his *Regulations for the Inner Chambers*, a didactic work designed specifically to be read by women. The fact that Lü Kun uses the *gui* as a framework for expounding the major principles asserted in earlier classics, makes his manual an essential work for examining how the ideological concept of the *gui* was established and its implications for women’s place in society in the late imperial period.

Lü Kun explains in his preface that he compiled *Regulations for the Inner Chambers* as a reaction to what he perceived as the degenerate behavior of women, whether the vulgar speech of village women, the extravagant lifestyle of wealthy women, or women’s difficult relationships with other family members. In his preface, he also frowns upon women’s participation in literary activities.²⁷ Lü Kun’s criticism of the disappointing behavior of women reveals the gap between orthodox principle and social reality. She Yongning, who contributed a preface for the manual, points out, “There are so many transgressions of the principles for the inner sphere; the way of the world is



Figure 1.1a-b “The Younger Sister-in-Law Serving as a Role Model for the Older Ones” (Shaodi hua sǎo), reprinted from Lü Kun, *Guifan*, 4.690-91.

daily getting worse.”²⁸ Troubled by the fact that “the person dwelling within the inner quarters” (*guimen zhong ren*) discarded rituals and behavior codes, Lü Kun hopes his manual can provide moral guidelines that she can uphold, recite, and learn.²⁹

Although Lü Kun’s didactic text may not fully represent social reality, his moral instructions framed by the notion of the *gui* indicates that the *gui* had become a recognized discursive field in dominant ideological discourse for reiterating gender boundaries and constructing the female subjectivity. The preface writers for the different editions of *Regulations for the Inner Chambers* insisted on the *gui* being inscribed with moral codes, turning it into a locus for defining women’s proper roles in society. As She Yongning claims, “There must be regulations in the women’s chambers.”³⁰ They compiled and reprinted Lü Kun’s manual in order to continuously spread “old values.” The first *juan* of the manual is a large collection of quotations from Confucian classics such as the *Book of Rites*, with Lü’s annotations and interpretations. Lü’s written commentary, however, reiterates gender division without offering any suggestions for bringing about change. Despite the subtle changes in Lü’s approach to women’s issues, the basic values he reasserts are unchanged. Lü Kun’s strategy in promoting these

ideas is adaptive; he made *Regulations for the Inner Chambers* more user-friendly with illustrations and annotations. But these approaches can be viewed as efforts to make his didacticism more effective and more widely received. In encouraging women to be “expedient” in case of emergency, he is calling for a restricted moral autonomy that remains within the boundaries of orthodox values.

The subject targeted by *Regulations for the Inner Chambers* is explicitly termed the *guiren* (the person dwelling within the inner quarters).³¹ The *gui* is the defining element in both of these terms. Because the *gui*, as a physical space, was possible only in the ideal Chinese house, the terms suggest a class prerogative. It is clear that the majority of women in the late imperial period would not have had the means to live in the ideal house capable of accommodating a *gui*. Elsewhere, in his *Records on Practical Government* (*Shizheng lu*), as quoted by Handlin, Lü Kun does seem to recognize class as a mitigating factor. Unlike his contemporary Hai Rui (1514–1587), who insists that all women should remain inside the home, Lü Kun maintains a tolerant attitude toward lower-class women working outside their homes as wine vendors and weavers. He even suggests that they contribute to the local economy.³² However, he does not address the class issue in his manual. Nor do other assertive preface writers specifically define the *guiren* in terms of social class. The ambiguity of class in constructing the regulations for the women’s chambers makes it appear that Lü Kun intended these regulations to be socially inclusive. In making his manual easier to understand, he also aimed at a more general female audience. Indeed, the *guiren* subject appears to be synonymous with the generic notion of women vis-à-vis men. This is not surprising, given that the *gui* was discursively constructed rather than reflective of the actual situations in which women found themselves.

In addition to the ideological-didactic construction of the *gui* as women’s proper social place, the image of women and the space of the women’s chambers had long been part of Chinese literary imagination. Among all the major literary genres, boudoir poetry had assumed the longest-lived and most important place in Chinese literary history, with the earliest examples dating to the Han period. Most commonly, male literati used the image to exercise their imaginations about female sexuality and emotion. The setting of the inner chambers was aestheticized and the image of women objectified in poetic forms mainly to serve their desires and interests.³³ The literary construction of women’s boudoir life was remarkably different from that

in Confucian gender ideology, but it likewise strengthened the association between women and the inner sphere. The sensual depiction of the feminine setting, which is typical of the literati poetic imaginary, emphasizes “a closed and enclosed environment, in which the female dweller is typically portrayed as static and passive.” The representability of domesticity with stock images makes the concept of “the inner” (*nei*) more than an ethical concept.³⁴

Despite degrees of complexity in actual situations, the *gui* had become both a real and an imaginary place for women.³⁵ Moral instructions for women as well as other discourses centered on the *gui* provide clues for constructing female subjects in both social formation and discourse. They generated conceptualized gendered positions into which women could be interpolated. In other words, the *gui* was molded into a symbol of women’s sexual status and gender position and became a recognizable signifier in late imperial Chinese social and cultural practices. Women inevitably brought these meanings into their poetry even as their strategic uses of these meanings differed.

THEORIZING A POETICS OF THE *GUI*

Consignment to the *gui* determined, shaped, and constrained not only women’s lifestyles but also their relationship to literary power and discourse. It has been a commonplace that in premodern China women in general were ideologically and institutionally excluded from the public sphere of intellectual and literary activities. However, it was the belief in and practice of the gendered distinction between the inner and outer spheres that left women without a legitimate place in literary practice. The visibility of writing women in the late imperial era therefore generated heated debates on the issues of women’s talent and virtue, exemplified in the famous debate between Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801), who opposed women writers, and Yuan Mei (1716–1797), who supported them.³⁶ Many writing women were actually struggling (or claimed to be doing so) with the question of whether or not to write. Like Western women writers such as Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), writing women in late imperial China suffered from “the anxiety of authorship.” As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, this anxiety was unique to female authors because they lived in “a culture whose

fundamental definitions of literary authority are overtly and covertly patriarchal.”³⁷ Although Gilbert and Gubar’s study is about Western women writers, their observation can be applied to the situation of late imperial Chinese women poets. The *gui* in the context of Chinese culture institutionally defined a patriarchal condition that excluded women from the public sphere of writing.

Even though many women crossed the boundaries and engaged in writing, they entered into literary practice on a different footing than men. The *shi* and *ci* genres had been constructed within male social, political, and cultural practices long before women entered the field in significant numbers. The poetic treatment of the images of women and the boudoir, whether for aesthetic appreciation or political-erotic allegory, had been an influential and far-reaching literati tradition, from early times up until the Qing period. It left behind a vast repertory of vocabulary, imagery, themes, and motifs centered on the images of women as well as their emotional world and life settings. Women poets to a large extent relied on the repertory of available representations in writing about themselves. The most easily identifiable textual feature is their heavy reliance on conventional codes and formulaic descriptions developed in the literati boudoir literature, such as terms describing women’s garments, ornaments, and the boudoir setting. Women also derived textual positions and voice from the literati inscription of femininity. This feature in women’s poetry is particularly evident in their employment of the literati topoi of boudoir lament. Speaking through recognized poetic conventions, some texts by women are barely distinguishable from those of their male predecessors. This similarity suggests that women writers found an important channel that connected them to the literary past.

Although women’s literary imaginations could go as far as those of their male counterparts, the inner chambers often circumscribed the field in which they could develop a distinctive literary culture. Familial and female homosocial life was an important channel of poetic production. Daily activities in the inner chambers provided a primary source apart from books and hearsay from which to draw inspiration for poetic themes and motifs. The fact that they spent most of their time in the inner chambers while male family members left home for education and career explains why women often echo the traditional boudoir lament in their poetry. This also explains why domestic activities such as weaving, cooking, and sewing disproportionately outnumber other subject matter in the thematics of women’s poetry, as Hu Shi observed.