

**Soaring Eagles of the High Qing:
Women's Writing as a Path to Social Advancement in Patriarchal China**

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Abstract

This essay is about the women's writing during the High Qing era in seventeenth century China. During this time only a few women of the elite class had acquired reputations as outstanding poetesses. The cosmopolitan culture of the Qing empire contributed to the development of the arts and motivated women writers to challenge their society with their writing. Elite society during Qing era appreciated and publicized these women's work despite the fact that gender roles continued to shape their lives. Women found in poetry, a chance to develop and express their literary talent. The essay components explore the historical background, the role of women in traditional China their education, culture and their poetry. I discuss how women used their writings as a path to social advancement in patriarchal China. I also explain how women took their writings to a new level of confidence creating their own writing identity.

Introduction

The High Qing era was a period of cultural prosperity and expansion for Chinese society. Both men and women were caught in an extraordinary transformation that witnessed the contact of the established Chinese culture with the foreign Manchu culture. The amalgamation of the two cultures, the native and the foreign, resulted in one that lasted almost three hundred years from 1644 to 1911. During the High Qing era (1644-1839), China was still a patriarchal society in which men dominated most of the social, economical, and political tasks, while women were confined to the inner chambers of the household domains. Through their poetry, women of the High Qing expressed their thoughts, feelings and emotions and developed a new interpretation of their role in their society. Women's literature and poetry of the High Qing is important because it shines a new light on the society that for long time was recorded by men and governed by them.

Men had a broader education than women, they had the privilege to study the Confucian Classics, while women, barred from holding positions in the government, could not study the Classics. This is why they took their writing to a new level of confidence, challenged the male world and tried to create with their writing their own identity. Women's writing opened up a new window from the seclusion of their inner domain and gave readers access to their private life. The women's writing experience was in a way an answer to the submissiveness of their domestic life and reveals their need to break away from the seclusion and privacy of the household domains. This experience began a new tradition in China's history of the writing woman and expresses an understanding of her self-consciousness and individualism.

Most Chinese women were commoners and peasants with little education but elite women were more educated and took advantage of their education. When elite women discovered that the road to success was through marriage, and that education and cultivation of

their ability would enhance their marriage chances, they expanded their creative prowess and emerged out of their stagnant roles that had confined them and began to explore the outer chambers. For example, some women became famous writers and achieved success, advancing socially by marrying into gentry families. Elite women who had the educational background, discovered they could use their writing as a way to advance themselves by attracting and marrying men of high social standing. During the High Qing era women realized that this historical time was ideal for the advancement of their literary pursuit. In fact, Susan Mann in her book, *Precious Records Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, also states that: "China in the High Qing era was a fluid, competitive society markedly different from its counterparts in Europe and North America".¹

It was this aspect of Qing culture that pushed women writers to break the shell and compete with male writers to display their own talent. Women writers of this time boldly demonstrated that they were capable of challenging the chambers of gender, class and a male dominant society with their literary work which in turn inspired later generations of women writers. The High Qing era allowed women to exchange their writings not only in the form of letters, but also through poetry, bibliography and literature and offered the few educated elite women a chance to participate in literary clubs where male contributed as well. The experience of exchanging literary work with men was one of the new exciting and challenging aspects of the new dynasty and it made a world of difference for those women that finally they had the chance to show their voice in public without fear or regrets. Writing for women became a new alternative to their roles as mothers and wives because they had a chance to expand their intellectuality especially when they realized that their poems, for example, might be preserved and transmitted to new generations of women writers. In a way, the experience of writing gave

women “literary immortality” because their writing would continue to have a heart beat for centuries to come. Women did not write just about their passionate relationships with men or their pathetic lives as unhappy women forced to marry or love someone they hardly knew, but included themes such as love for their country, their political concerns or their Buddhist experiences in search of spiritual enlightenment as new winds of change crossed over China during the High Qing era.

What drove women to put emotional investment in writing was the realization of the power of words for self-empowerment and social advancement. The consciousness of the self and self-representation, and the increase of women as writers, created a new space for women’s literary voices. It showed that this new role of the female writer was not an isolated phenomenon because it created a web of intellectual and sophisticated relationships among women who benefited from each other’s support when they exchanged of their literary artifacts. This paper will examine how writing became important in elite women’s lives during the High Qing era, discussing women’s roles in traditional China, the value of female talent, the cult of widows and chastity, women’s education and gender relations. These issues will be further explored via the poetry of four famous female Chinese writers of the High Qing era, two from the gentry class, Shang Jinglan, Wang Duanshu, and two courtesans who married into gentry families, Liu Rushi and Wang Wei. Thanks to the discovery of some of their work Chinese scholars have been able to preserve and circulate their delicate voices. The literary work of High Qing women made history and it has motivated a student like me to get out of my shy shell and expose their beautiful voices once again with great love, pride and passion.

Historical Background

The Qing dynasty (1644-1911) created by the Manchus emerged on the horizon of Chinese civilization when China was undergoing the transition from a traditional to a modern society. In his book, *The Manchu Way*, Mark Elliott speaks of Manchu rule as a “shaping force that generated a strong sense of nationalistic-racial consciousness among Chinese”.² The Manchus never assimilated into Chinese society but were able to ascend to power because they sponsored Neo-Confucian norms of government. Elliott emphasizes that the winning cards in the Manchu’s hands were the assurance of legitimacy and support from most of the Han Chinese, maintenance of their own cultural identity and achievement of military conquest.

The Manchu’s acknowledgement that written communication was a unifying factor that could help them better understand Chinese culture won them the support of the erudite, aristocratic Chinese elite. The Manchus accepted China as a traditional society and utilized its cultural accomplishments in establishing their new empire. William Theodore de Bary explains: “Although the Manchu conquest of China might have been expected to produce, under foreign rule, dramatic changes in Chinese life, it is a sign of the powerful inertial force of Chinese civilization—the magnitude of the society and the survival power of both its people and its culture—that so much of traditional thought and institutions persisted into the new era and, in fact, even lent stability and strength to the new regime”.³

The Qing empire offered to Chinese society a flexible, cosmopolitan culture living room for possibilities and expansion. This aspect of Manchu culture helped to develop a positive relationship with the conquered Chinese people. When the Qing empire was established, women saw the transition from one dynasty to the other as a positive change. Elite and educated women

during the High Qing era (1644-1839) were in the process of finding their own voice within the spheres of the inner quarters where they spent most of their lives. Susan Mann analyzes Dorothy Ko's study of women and culture and writes: "urbanization, commercialization, and the print culture of late Ming society brought women's voices into the historical records".⁴

Women in Traditional China

Women took their writing to a new level of confidence that gave them the chance to create social communities in which they exchanged their writing expressions. Female writers knew that as soon as they were born their mothers prepared them for the sole reason they came into the world: marriage and child bearing. Women were still living in a Confucian patriarchal society in which parents arranged marriages and only the parents' wishes were considered important in determining their daughter's destiny. Women had to follow the Confucian principle, "The Law of Three Obediences" which defined and confined women in a very strict social sphere with very little fluidity: a daughter must obey her father, after marriage she must obey her husband and her husband's parents, especially the mother-in-law who became a dominant figure in her life. If widowed, she had to obey to her eldest son.⁵ One can understand how much Confucianism penetrated into the Chinese society and shaped the lives of men and women, by analyzing the *Analects* in which Confucian values and morals are taught in the form of conversations between Confucius (551-479 BCE) and his students. The *Analects* provide instruction on conduct such as filial devotion (*xiao*), humaneness (*ren*), and ritual decorum (*li*). These values became the foundations of Chinese society and deeply influenced the relationships of men and women, assigning everybody a specific role. In the *Analects* for women for example, the author, Song Ruozhao, emphasizes the guidance for women by saying: "To be a woman, you must first learn how to establish yourself as a person. The way to do this is simply by working

hard to establish one's purity and chastity. By purity, one keeps one's self undefiled; by chastity, one preserves one's honor".⁶ Regarding the distinctions between men and women Song points out that "The inner and outer quarters are each distinct; the sexes should be segregated...Do not be on familiar terms with men outside the family; have nothing to do with women of bad character. Establish your proper self so as to become a [true] human being".⁷ Confucianism and its teaching became a living model of customs by which men and women hold onto making it the bone marrow of their lives. When women emerged as writers during the High Qing era, Confucianism was still very much part of their lives. Women were aware of how much it was rooted in their society and few of them openly opposed it. Women instead, used their writing skills to rise above it and used poetry, for example, as a way to boost their intellectuality and spirituality.

In particular, the Qing dynasty sponsored the cult of the chaste widow as a model for other women. Matthew H. Sommer in his book *Sex Law and Society in Late Imperial China*, points out that: "The 'chaste widow' played a significant role in propaganda that tied sexual loyalty (of wife to husband) to political loyalty (of subject to ruler). Ming-Qing law granted widows the strongest rights of any women with regard to property and independence. However, these rights depended on chastity, a status violated by either remarriage or adultery".⁸ A woman without a significant man in her life had to face hardship and danger; she was vulnerable and had a difficult time supporting herself. A widow who chose not to remarry had to develop new strategies in order to survive. If she was talented and used her skills to produce art work, she could sell it in order to survive, whether it was calligraphy, paintings or poetry. A good example of a talented chaste widow is Shang Jinglan (1604-CA.1680) from a gentry family, and a writer of the High Qing era who chose to remain a chaste widow after her husband's death and used her

writing skills to support herself and her children. Shang is an admirable woman because she took upon herself the responsibility to educate her children, remained faithful to her deceased husband and became an accomplished writer. In a way widowhood gave a woman more authority and autonomy that she would have if she decided to remarry.

The Qing dynasty shaped society with rules and laws in a way that men and women were expected to conform in relation to gender roles. These laws for example, reflect the dynasty's effort to deal with social and demographic changes. The instructions for widows for example, tell us a lot about the roles of women during the Qing dynasty. One record that has emerged from China's past is the *Qing Code*, the legal system of the Chinese Empire and in the section regarding the role of widows in society it outlines instructions for the ones who the widow had to depend on after the passing of her husband. Article 89, *Supporting Orphans and Old Persons* says: "As for widowers, widows, orphans, solitary persons, and persons who are critically or seriously disabled or poor, who have no relatives on whom they may rely, and cannot survive on themselves, if the official having jurisdiction who ought to support them does not support them, the punishment [for the official] will be 60 strokes of the heavy bamboo".⁹ The Qing's legal system fabricated specific restrictions for widows as reinforcement of the Confucian principles and it was a way to keep order and harmony and moral standards in the Chinese society. It was a way to keep a tighter grip on women and subordinate them to male's rules.

Athanasius Kircher, S.J. a German Jesuit and scholar who never traveled to China, during the first decades of the seventeenth century, relied on testimony and observations from Jesuit missionaries who lived there for sometimes studying and observing Chinese culture, customs and their society to write *China Illustrata*. In some of his observations on society he reported:

I can scarcely describe how strictly the Chinese guard their women, in private as well as in public. They observe this law so strictly that they keep them away from strangers and relatives, and even from their own sons... The women's houses are set up so that they see no one, and no one sees them. Nothing is rarer than their leaving the house. When they do go out, they are completely shut up in the litters built for them without even a crack left for them to see the outside world.¹⁰

This observation made in mid sixteenth century in China, has the power to bring the reader back in time and its words stir a wave of emotions and feelings that open a wider window in understanding how women lived in that time. The High Qing era regulated the lives of women with laws in order to keep harmony in society but at the same time sponsored education and the cultivation of talents as hallmarks of a flourishing society. It is almost impossible to put women's writers of the High Qing in the framework of their society without acknowledging laws and regulations of the dynasty.

Women's Education Gender roles and Culture

In Chinese society men had higher and broader education than women because they had extensive knowledge of the Confucian Classics. In order to climb the social hierarchy, regardless of background, a man had to study the Confucian Classics to prepare for the imperial civil service examination and become a scholar official, the highest position in society. Women were not required to learn the Classics because they had no role in the government but they might be educated if they were born to wealthy families and their learning was cultivated. William Theodore de Bary asserts: "The term *women's learning* appears in the section on the ministry of state in the *Rites of Zhou*, where women's posts are listed. There it refers to virtue, speech, decorum, and work a broad range of attributes... a woman who was not well versed in classical ritual and accomplished in letters could not be considered learned".¹¹ In ancient times and

throughout the course of the dynasties, women's learning was considered unimportant and inferior to that of men and only a few written records remain. The idea that women should not learn how to read and write emerged from the limitations imposed by their gender roles and the fact that women served as symbols of family honor and prestige. Dorothy Ko emphasizes that gender and class constituted the two models by which Chinese women were defined in society. In the Confucian family model a child had to be obedient to his/her parents, carry respect and obey. The Confucian principle "The Law of Three Obedience" affected women and limited their roles in society.¹²

Although these rigid roles and expectations limited a woman's ability to explore and develop literary horizons, it did not totally impair her ability to cultivate her personality and desire to learn. In fact, women from all families and age groups could find in writing a chance to reshape their identity and transcend their roles of submissive beings to roles that gave them the opportunity to advance socially with success and determination. Once women began to write they expressed themselves through letters, poetry, poems and other literary forms in a way that showed they were determined to have their voices heard. Women were so eager to learn that sometimes they risked being caught with their hands in the basket of learning but courageously faced the outcomes.

In her article, "*The Cultivation of Female Talent: Views on Women's Education in China During the Early and High Qing Periods*", Clara Wing-Chung Ho writes of Lady Chen who could memorize books in her childhood, but whose mother scolded her by saying that this talent would prevent her from pursuing and cultivating her housework chores.¹³ It seems clear that not only fathers had a determining role in their daughter's will for learning but their mothers could be influential as well. Lady Chen is an example that a woman's domestic domain was in the inner

chambers and that she had no right to be educated because education could give her power and perhaps switch her role from submissive to dominant, disrupting the patriarchal society she was part of.

Although society and gender roles determined the fate of a woman's education, some Chinese scholars saw education as a positive experience for a woman. Francesca Bray, in her analysis of women, writes that Chinese scholar Lu Kun (1536-1618) advocated education of women not only of elite families but also commoners. Some women who were able to get a basic education used the learned skills to communicate with female relatives as a way to feel free from the walls of the inner chambers in the form of letters. Francesca Bray asserts: "Women clung to such friendship if they could. Letters were one way to cross the forbidden spaces between their husband's house and their natal home, to invite their dear ones into their own secluded quarters and cultivate the precious friendship. A few women were accomplished literary writers, and the poems and letters they exchanged have been preserved".¹⁴

Letters played a greater role in women's lives because they symbolized a life beyond the walls of the inner chambers and enriched the network of their relationships by bringing the outside world in with the fresh news of their female writing companions. Daria Berg emphasizes a distinction between a mother's writing and a daughter's writing in the context of socio-cultural expectations. She says that: "the mother's writings for and about their own daughters appear 'cheerful' and 'positive', whereas the lyrics from daughters for and about their mothers, though not devoid of joy, appear a lot more subdued".¹⁵ The reason for this distinction can be seen in the fact that a mother had a higher status and authority than her daughter or daughter-in laws. It reveals a daughter role of submissiveness and her recognition that there was a more important woman in her life beside herself. In addition, a mother authority over another female whether

daughter or daughter-in-law gave her a sense of power and control over another female, a position that she could not otherwise achieve in the male dominant society.

Letters of women from the elite class for example, show how they lived their lives, their interest in intellectual pursuit and their desire to improve their writing skills. Letters became vehicles for expressing individual creativity and talent. A well crafted example is a letter written by Shang Jinglan (1603-ca.1680) a widow, a matriarch and mother-teacher of her deceased husband's family. She addressed the letter to her daughters-in-law, Zhang Dehui and Zhu Derong, expressing moral values and qualities as talent and virtue for a woman to be proud and as standards of performance:

After burning my pens and discarding my inkstones for nearly thirty years, I happened to see on my son's desk a copy of the *Combined Manuscripts of the Zither Tower [Qinlou hegao]*, written by Zhang Chayun of Wuling, Zhejiang. Chayun was a talented lady and a filial daughter. Therefore her poetry is honest and tranquil and comes straight from her nature and her feelings [*xingqing*], in the tradition of the *Book of Odes*. I explored her poems over and over again. I could not bear to let them out of my hands.

When I think of Chayun's talent, I know that you may be able to match it. When I think of her filiality, I know you can equal that too. But to reach Chayun's state of perfection, you will still need to admonish each other.¹⁶

This letter carries the power and authority of a mother-in-law who expects nothing less from her two daughters in-law when it comes to values such talent and filial piety. Shang's language is straight-forward and to the point in making sure that her daughters-in-law behave properly according to Confucian principles and in order to become virtuous and honorable women. The writing is also an encouragement to her daughters-in-law to show how writing can be pursued to enhance a woman's talent and self-cultivation. As an educated woman, Shang Jinglan realized that writing was a powerful tool of communication and a way to get into someone's heart and soul. She was aware that words can sometimes tear the fragile walls of

inner emotions but she used them compassionately without regrets. Shang was from the gentry class and she enjoyed cultivating her writing skills because it elevated her status and cultural sophistication. Daria Berg in her book *The Quest for Gentility in China* asserts that the gentry class (*shi*) was a status that distinguished an elite woman from that of a commoner (*su*) and her style was of an elegant woman (*ya*) as opposed to the ordinary one, who was seen as a vulgar (*shu*) a woman who was unrefined and without a former education.¹⁷

During the high Qing era the quality of life improved and women slowly began to have access to education and purchase books for reading: “The eighteenth century was the apogee of instructions books for women”.¹⁸ The high Qing era put more stress on female education as a way to be a better mother so she could instruct her children, especially sons, who someday might become a representative of the country. A literate mother also had the responsibility to morally educate her children and teach values of proper conduct and social behavior. A literate mother was children’s first teacher: “Her sons learned their first lessons in morals and in letters from their mothers before they went to school or acquired a private tutor at age seven or eight”.¹⁹ Furthermore, as Dorothy Ko emphasizes: “By transmitting a literate woman’s culture across generations, they effectively transcended the inner chambers temporally, just as the itinerant teachers defied the same boundaries spatially...This highlights the possibilities for fulfillment and a meaningful existence even within the confines the Confucian system imposed upon women”.²⁰

The eighteenth century revisited the concept of women’s learning and education and initiated a debate among Chinese scholars. In fact, William T. Rowe writes: “Critics claimed that educating women was a waste because their minds were too unsophisticated to grasp the essential meaning of the classics. Other scholars like activist official Chen Hongmu (1696-1771)

had different views on the subject and concluded, “The process of civilization begins in the women’s quarters”.²¹ Women’s learning remained anchored to gender, role and male personal opinion which restrained a woman’s possibility of expanding intellectually.

Clara Wing-Chung Ho emphasizes an eminent figure in late seventeenth century, Li Yu (1611-1680) who wrote on the importance of women’s learning and literature, culture and aesthetics. He highlighted the value of women’s education and argued that since the family’s harmony was a woman’s responsibility they had to make self-sacrifices in order to maintain it. Li Yu stated that: “all of the four arts, calligraphy, painting, music and chess should be required of ladies”.²² It is clear that Li Yu cared about the development of arts and aesthetics in women’s life. Sometimes Chinese scholars had different views on women’s education and although they supported it they still believed women should have some restrictions on the materials they were learning.

Some writers and scholars defended and supported women’s rights to education and literacy. Their view on women’s education appeared sometimes as a controversial issue and it was related to the belief that men were superior to women. Clara Wing-Chung Ho gives the example of Yuan Mei (1716-1797), a successful writer who, promoted and appreciated the poetry of women and supported their ability to display their creative qualities. Yuan Mei, although appreciative of women’s writing, expresses his strict Confucian assumption when he stated: “I don’t want my daughter to be an expert in the *Jiujing* (*The Nine Classics*) and then serve at the imperial court, to be addressed by the emperor as *xiansheng* (teacher). I just want her to have sufficient knowledge to understand the wine and tea menu and to serve her husband well”.²³ Yuan Mei’s statement makes it clear that the primary purpose of letting women receive education was to enable them a chance to perform their household duties better, reinforcing the

idea that women with some literacy were still inferior to men. Despite the different views regarding women's education by Chinese scholars, women continued their pursuit of learning and writing. Women began to realize that education increased their prestige and certainly their crippled feet due to bounding since young age, didn't stop them from interacting with other women. Women continued to put emphasis on learning and writing not only to enhance their skills but on occasion also to support their families. Liuxi (Louis) Meng in his book *Poetry as Power* points out that Dorothy Ko used a special term for this type of women calling them "man-like" women. "By teaching and selling their works to support their families, these women had assumed male roles...they tended not to write on traditional female themes; instead, they tried to participate in public affairs and wrote about men's concerns".²⁴ Writing opened up new possibilities for women as a way to interact with other women and discuss and appreciate each other's work.

Dorothy Ko identifies three types of communities where women gathered to discuss their literary works: the domestic community made by mothers or mothers-in-law who gathered with other female relatives to discuss their literary works and accomplishments. The social community included related women, neighbors or friends who lived far away. The public community was a visible place where women received recognition for their writings which were published and sponsored throughout society. Ko writes that the Manchu conquest in 1644 did not interrupt the spread of women's education and their involvement in public culture. She also points out that secular trends such as commercial growth or urbanization were "the power supply that fed into the continued vibrancy of women's culture and spread of women's education".²⁵

As time passed women acquired a stronger sense of the self and writing became a mark of cultivated humanity. A woman was expected to nourish and develop her aesthetic and moral

capacities but she also was not supposed neglect her family duties. Women of the High Qing era grew up with the perception that they had talent to write poetry and empty their feelings and emotions in papers, linen, and fans. Fueled by their literary passion, they were able to create an identity of their own. Women wrote poetry for different reasons, for example, some of them wrote poems before committing suicide. Their poems reveal their struggle and frustration in the framework of a male dominant society and the clash with gender relations.

During the High Qing era, women became more conscious of their moral authority but at the same time they were aware of the demands of housework chores or in the case of the commoners, of their work in the fields. The concept of erudite women and the conflict between the priority of writing and the cultivation of moral values, which kept women at home most of the time, challenged many Chinese scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth century who were trying to put women's writing into an acceptable context. Susan Mann observes:

To some extent the life cycle itself took care of the conflicts between the demands of work and writing. In Jiangnan's elite families during the High Qing period, young girls were educated and encouraged to write poetry until they married. At marriage, these same young women were expected to set aside brush and inkstone to manage the rice and salt. Finally, as mothers-in-law or widows, many women were able to resume their writing, turning over family responsibilities to the next generation of women.²⁶

It seems from Mann's analysis that women were granted freedom to write and when they were at one point in their life when they needed to express themselves, as a way to detach from the male dominant world, suddenly this alluring privilege had to be taken away because social duties and gender relations closed the doors to it. Not all women during the High Qing era set aside the love and passion discovered when they were writing poetry and embraced a new role in their life. Courtesans for example, were free to pursue their passion for poetry because they had more

independent and a different relationships with men which put them outside of their living quarters. It is also true that widows, courtesans or women from gentry families were able to breed and live their writing passion in an exciting and unique way. Each one of these women at one point in their life was able to discover their own voice through their writing, and were able to use their writing as a path to social advancement.

The Power of Education and Writing

Some women, while aware of the male dominant society that had forced them to accept the practice of foot binding, seclusion, chastity and sharing the marital bed with high consorts and concubines, enjoyed cultural mobility and writing provided a primary avenue for this mobility. The ability to move between the two cultures, without feeling the pressure of being displaced, opened a new door for women because the Manchu's rule supported and valorized Chinese culture. They integrated it into their own giving women the space they needed to grow intellectually as evidence shows from their writings. A woman was successful when she was able to prove to herself and to society that she was a capable individual with a personality and mind of her own. This capability stemmed from the power of education and writing that gave women a chance to create their own identity. In fact, this idea of the educated woman gained emphasis during the eighteenth century, as rising living standards and access to education expanded and women were able to express their talents and beliefs in the form of writing.

Talent was a prominent and decisive theme in poetry during the High Qing era because it enabled a woman to succeed in a relationship with a man who enjoyed the company of an intellectually capable companion. Susan Mann in her book, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family*, writes that "The phrase talented woman is a direct translation of the Chinese word *cainu*,

which was widely used during the eighteenth and nineteenth century”.²⁷ Talent was a creative sensibility that few women possessed and which gave some of them a chance to better marriages. The awareness of their writing’s potential gave women the energy to fly freely in their living spaces by embroidering paper with their thoughts and emotions. The women of the High Qing era practiced cultural awareness through their observation of thoughts and actions of people. While elite men were occupied with their official positions and study for the civil service exam, women wrote about their own lives in a literary fashion that showed their own view of the world.

The fact that women writers were able to publish their work during the High Qing era demonstrates that the new dynasty encouraged the development of the arts. According to Daria Berg “The vast reading public and thriving publishing industry provided a profitable environment for women writers and the editors of their work”.²⁸ Publishing a book put a woman writer under a new light and gave her a sense of power and intellectual authority even though she was excluded from the political and official life. Publishing a book created a valuable treasure to pass from one generation to another: “The printed text, passed in manuscript or hand-copied or block printed form from family to family, studio to studio, offered learned women in High Qing times a unique place in both the domestic life of the family and the public life of high culture”.²⁹ Women published their work because their poetry caught the attention of literate men who appreciated and sponsored their writings.

Publishing a book became an important aspect of social life especially for women who took advantage of the new cultural trends that emerged during the Qing dynasty. In fact, Lisa Raphals in her book *Sharing the Light: Representation of Women and Virtue in Early China*, talks about three emerging factors in book printing: “the development of woodcut printing technology, the growth of a new reading public, prominently including women, and also changes

in cultural vocabulary, with a growing emphasis on filiality, construed as loyalty (or chastity) to the family and the state”.³⁰ That a book could be printed now with pictures became an appealing ingredient because it empowered the writing with a visual expression of the written words. The picture in the book stimulated emotions and also offered to men and women something pleasant to look at whether it was an idyllic scene or a woman embroidering or farms on the fields.

Women came to realize that publishing a book of their poetry could increase their chance to be known and maybe become famous and gave them the opportunity to better marriages and a better life style once men discovered that they were talented individuals.

Men became fascinated and obsessed with women’s writings and this resulted in the creation of a new female culture of the writing woman, encouraging the publication of their work. Harriet T. Zurndorfer in her book *Chinese Women in the Imperial Past: New Perspective* emphasizes: “Quite a number of Ch’ing women’s works were published as a result of men’s efforts. Many female-authored writings would never have been published, if they had not been intentionally collected and compiled by men. In fact, women’s work did not receive sufficient attention in the past”.³¹ The men’s interest in publishing women’s writing represented respect and acknowledgment of their literary achievement and the opportunity for the women to be known and appreciated for their work. Thus the High Qing culture stands out because women used their writing as a way to rise above their household duties and tried different approaches in order to be heard by men. Some women writers even disguised themselves as men to be part of literary clubs as Peng-hsiang Chen and Whitney Crothers Dilley point out in their book of *Critical Studies*. In their analysis, they talk of the famous courtesan Liu Rushi (1618-1664) who dressed up as a man and showed up one day at literary master, poet and bureaucrat Qian Qianyi’s (1582-1664) mansion where she impressed him with her talent. After discovering who she was,

Qian proposed to her on the spot.³² After marriage, Liu Rushi and Qian Qianyi, continued to work together because both loved poetry and published their work together too. Wilt Idema and Beata Grant in their book *The Red Brush Writing Women of Imperial China* underline that: “Following their return to Changshu, Qian Qianyi completed the compilation of his *Collected Poems of the Successive Reigns*, which was printed in 1649. Liu Rushi collaborated on this project by editing the section on women poets”.³³

Women’s Poetry during the High Qing Era

With the evidence I have discovered, I will analyze a poem from four women, discussing their reasons for writing it, the messages they offered to their readers and how they expressed their inner thoughts and emotions with the sensibility and gracefulness of their ivory hands. Each one of these women at one point in her life was able to discover their own voice through her writing, using it as a way to social advancement. Their passionate poetry has left a remarkable testimony throughout the roads of Chinese history. Women writers of the High Qing era were aware and conscious of the social changes and did not miss any opportunity to have their poetry known and publicized.

The early years of the Qing conquest opened up new possibilities for women writers and due to the social dislocation caused by the war, they were able to make a living by using their artistic talent, as tutors or painters. Shang Jinglan (1604-ca.1680) was a poet and a painter from a gentry family who became a widow after her husband committed suicide as a Ming loyalist.³⁴ It was common for women to follow their husband in death as an honorable act of love, respect and compassion. Shang Jinglan decided to honor her husband by staying alive and becoming a chaste widow. During the High Qing era being a chaste widow was a remarkable choice because it

proved to society that a woman was virtuous and loyal in upholding her deceased husband's honor while continuing in seclusion to support his family. Susan Mann in her article, *Widows in the Kinship, Class, and Community structures of Qing Dynasty China*, points out that: "Sexual fidelity (*jie*) was the wife's quintessential virtue, the conjugal metaphor for loyalty (*zhong*), or filial piety (*xiao*)".³⁵ When a woman became a widow she was vulnerable and held onto fidelity even after her husband's death not only to protect herself from the risk of being forced into an unwanted second marriage, but to protect her children as well. Shang Jinglan loved her children and she did everything she could to protect them because she not only had to be a mother to them but a father too and responsible for their moral and ethical upbringing. A widow and a mother had a huge responsibility living without a male partner because she was in charge of setting examples of moral education, propriety and right conduct according to Confucian ethics.

Shang Jinglan wrote her deceased husband a passionate poem in which she emphasized that his loyalty and courage will immortalize him. The poem reveals that by remaining a chaste widow she still honor and respect him with her life and her words express it best in "Mourning My Husband":

You have achieved the reputation of a thousand ages,
While I still cling to this one single life.
Lord and minister: indeed the great norm,
Sons and daughters: human feeling too.
You "broke the railing" when you were alive,
The stele you have left is your posthumous fame.
Although life and death are different roads,
In purest chastity we complete one another.³⁶

In the first sentence Shang first acknowledges the importance of her husband's action and the reason he committed suicide, emphasizing that he will be remembered as a man of great

honor and loyalty. She also adds how she feels lonely now that he had departed to the afterlife and how loving and close was their relationship. The prose seems in a form of dialogue telling him how much she cares for their children whom she has to raise alone now. Although she realizes that life and death are two natural events, her new status of chaste widow as a woman of virtue, will honor him even more since she will forever remain faithful to him. Shang Jinglan is a remarkable example of a talented chaste widow a policy that became symbol of Manchu rule and part of moral education programs sponsored by the throne. Perhaps by choosing to live as a chaste widow, Jinglan became a model for other women widow writers who talented and skilled in poetry wanted to put end to their lives. In her case, literature and writing doesn't enable her social mobility via marriage. She achieves social mobility by emphasizing her role as a chaste widow, by using her own voice through her writing as a way to social advancement. She listened to it and with their passionate poetry she not only enriched her life but also impacted the lives of women of her own time.

Another talented woman Wang Duanshu (1621-ca.1706) made writing the center of her life and is known for her collection of writings called *Yinhong Ji* (Red Chantings) published between 1651 and 1655.³⁷ This publication was unique because of the different writing forms and style and also because she adapted topics other than love and desire. Wang was raised in a gentry family and she was fortunate and taught to read the classics from early age. From her collection of writings emerges a delicate prose rich in wisdom and crafted with details that show her writing's qualities. The poem passionately written is titled "Telling My Story" and opens like a breath of fresh air:

So unexpectedly the prime of my life has passed,
As white hairs appear on the sides of my temples.
The flowing water goes its way, never to return:

And blue hills stand blocking my way forward.
 I look out over heaven and earth's expanse,
 Within which I cannot call a single speck my own.
 This world lacks people with a discerning eye,
 Who can tell the foolish from the wise?
 They delight in the crooked, don't love the straight:
 Comparable to the curved bow and the taut string...
 I sigh that I lack the ambition that soars;
 Tired and weary, I can only struggle on.
 I always feel as stupid as the cuckoo bird,
 Ashamed of trying to fill the sea with pebbles.
 The azure heaven cannot be questioned;
 Who says that the wise will come first?³⁸

Wang was also a talented artist and a painter and her poem seems to draw the reader in her world of colors and brush strokes that are beautifully displayed with vivid highlights which alternate through the lines like the waves in the ocean. Her poetry is intimate enough to reveal a woman who has lived her life without regrets and who is also proud of her career as a writer. The "white hair appear on the sides of my temples" shows her awareness that merciless time, slowly chips away pieces of her life. There is some sadness through the lines when she discovered that strength in life is the ability to master one's pain and suffering. She is aware that she is aging and like the cuckoo bird always stuck in a never ending deed she senses that she hasn't taken many steps on the earth and it is almost time for her departure to a new life. She concludes her beautiful poem by saying "Who says that the wise will come first?" leaving the reader awe with fear that knowledge will not satisfy the thirst for the meaning of existence and while her words resonates with authenticity and truthfulness we wonder... Wang with her writing has showed women of her time and beyond that there is power in words. These words, gave her the ability to transcend her role confined by a patriarchal society which kept women at home, forcing them to bound their feet, but did not restrain her mind and the spirit.

Shang Jinglan and Wang Duanshu were two women writers of the gentry class who analyzed poetry in relation to their life experiences and used their literary activities to make a living. Both women were fortunate for being able to acquire literary reputation with their poetry because they became symbols of a changing culture of the “writing woman”. Shang had chosen not to remarry while Wang remarried after her first husband’s death and in Chinese society she was a less virtuous woman than Shang although her poetry was of higher literary quality. In Chinese culture virtue always ranked higher than talent and literary scholar critics emphasized it for both women and men. Clara Wing-Chung Ho’s voice strongly underlines it: “In general, most critics claimed virtue to be the basis for all academic and literary works. They held that, without a sincere commitment to virtue, no matter how well written a work was, it would lack seriousness and could in no way be regarded as a piece of quality work”.³⁹

Men and women had equal responsibility to behave with dignity and worth and their writings when published had to shine like a piece of polished jade and show empathy. As Theodore De Bary writes: “If one understands that in commencing to write one must restrain one’s *qi* (the material force or life energy) and enter the lives of others, then one understand virtue in writing...”⁴⁰ Although Confucian philosophy and its values shaped the lives of women they continue to write poetry because it created social connections and fame especially when women exchanged and viewed their poems. Most Chinese women didn’t dare to challenge the Confucian structured society bounded by rigid oppressive rules that kept them at home, but a group of women that stood out from the majority of ordinary ones known as courtesans (*minji*), became writers and few achieved fame when they got promoted in their rank of virtue.

The poetry of the courtesans is crucial for understanding Chinese society in transition to a modern one and there is not better source than their own words. Courtesans stirred up Chinese

society because they were exposed to the public, and were talented because could write poetry, paint, had a very elegant calligraphy and were relatively independent. They entertained men showering them with idyllic pleasures and offering sexual freedom while playing music, composing poems, painting picturesque scenes or powdering their ivory complexion. In addition, courtesans had more privileges than gentry women and more freedom. In fact, as Daria Berg in her book *“Reading China”* writes: “In contrast to gentry women, courtesans were able to own property in their own right... Some courtesans did invest their savings in town mansions, country villas and gardens. They used these to entertain elite men, often with a view to making a good match in marriage before their fame declined or old age put an end to their careers”.⁴¹

Concubines and courtesans had important but different roles in the male dominant world.

Grace Fong, in her book *Herself an Author*, says that concubines were women who were purchased as secondary wives and who had a lower status than the primary legal wife. Fong writes that: “Women were procured as concubines for a variety of purposes, such as entertainment, and sexual, reproductive, and other services in the patriarchal family system”.⁴² Primary wives and concubines were on a different level of the female hierarchy but both were subordinate to a male dominant hierarchy. Once the concubine was brought into the male household the primary wife was dominant over the concubine and the male couldn’t interfere in their relationship. Courtesans were also important women in Chinese society and marriage system because they were an alternative to a sour marriage or a barren concubine without posing a threat to a man’s established family hold. Courtesans were present in social occasions and poetry clubs shaped by male figures because men writers found their talent, beauty and social skills inspirational to their own writing. Courtesans knew they had the potential to enhance a man’s life or writing ability with their qualities and hung in these clubs and literary circles like

bees in a hive. Susan Mann says that courtesans were not always object of sex and pleasures for men. In fact, she writes that: "Indeed, as appreciation of courtesans show, sex was considered the least of their services. The focus of the connoisseur was on the courtesan's talent and aesthetic taste".⁴³

Courtesans played a crucial role in men's life especially those with high positions and most of them, as Grace Fong explains: "Many were trained in these arts as children in preparation for entertaining literati clients. Liu Rushi (1618-1664), Gu Mei (1619-1664), and Dong Bai (1625-1651) were some of the most celebrated examples of courtesans who sought the status of concubine, or, the side room, as a privileged quarter and refuge from the floating world".⁴⁴ A talented courtesan played her cards well through writing, painting or own beauty and always aspired to a better life style. When she succeeded, she married into a gentry's family as a concubine which was a better status than the insecure one as courtesan.

Daria Berg points out that the famous courtesan Liu Rushi, also known as Liu Shi, (1618-1664) a close friend of Wang Duanshu, "ranks among the most upwardly mobile women writer of seventeenth century China. In her teens she gained fame as a poetess, painter and calligrapher. By the age of twenty-two she had already published several volumes of her poetry and married into the highest echelons of the elite".⁴⁵ Liu Rushi used her talent as poetess and writer to advance socially, winning Qian Qianyi's heart who did not think twice before marrying her. Not only did they enjoy each other's company, but being very much in love, they worked together publishing anthologies of women's poetry. Liu Rushi was born in a literary family, with her love poems for example, created a new genre characterized by intense emotion and passion and a style known as song-lyric (*ci*).⁴⁶ She was aware that song-lyrics were associated with courtesan culture so she often expressed them in a gentle and genuine prose. Her poetry although has

challenged even the most erudite Chinese scholars, is saturated with intricate and complex inferences.

Wilt Idema and Beata Grant in their book *“The Red Brush Writing Women of Imperial China”* express that in 1633 Liu Rushi was only fifteen when she fell in love with an intellectual Chen Zilong who played a major role in the genre of song-lyrics. In addition, Daria Berg pointed out that: “Chen became her soul-mate and intellectual companion but his wife eventually enforced their separation”.⁴⁷ Her passionate and tormented relationship with Chen can be viewed in her poem “Sitting Alone, Two Poems” written when Cheng Zilong took part in the metropolitan examination:

I
 The time of spring completes my lonely sitting,
 Pure harmony destroys my fragrant years.
 On the emerald bank: cold the mist-wrapped chignon;
 By the dark brook: returned from a jade-like dream.
 The numinous wind endless as in the past,
 But I take no pleasure in the stream.
 To what purpose this reddening of the grass?
 Yet the love of swallow and oriole persists.

II
 Last night my sorrowful thoughts were many,
 Now my grief is about to be doubled.
 Gods and immortals may loftily live in bliss,
 Flowers and birds are free to drift and soar.
 The jade mirror is filled with spring charms,
 The golden hook chilly throughout the night:
 I do not know whether this evening’s moon
 Truly regrets having lit up this empty room.⁴⁸

Liu Rushi begins her poem with profound sadness revealing how much she is suffering from the departure of her loved one. She portrays herself in one of the most vibrant and exciting times of the year, the spring, where magical and mystical can be seen in the emergence of new

life offered by nature. Spring is a time for transition and a time to wait for the miracles to happen and in Liu's case she is patiently waiting for her lover to come back. It seems she can hardly wait for the moment to come so she can put an end to her pain that not even the beauties of nature and the warmth and coziness of spring can soothe a poisonous labyrinth of illusions that compete with each other in an endless journey. Liu is aware, as she quarantines her emotions temporarily that life continues. She can hear birds crafting the blue skies of spring mornings with their love songs excited to sing to each other while flowers timidly emerge out of the wet grass sprinkled with small crystals of dew. But the integrity of such beauty cannot fill the emptiness that churns inside of her.

When she writes: "Pure harmony destroys my fragrant years" she is referring to the innocence of her adolescent years that are long gone and a time when she had to cease her thoughts, lock her emotions and accept a life style that she was not ready for. At age fourteen Liu was sold to the household of old minister Zhou Dengdao; she did not have a choice but to accept her fate.⁴⁹ She realized that she was not in control of her life anymore and she had to let go. Her poetry is powerful and heavy, her lover is far away and she feels lost and spent while her "mist-wrapped chignon" enhances her delicate features. Her mind continues wondering while her heart cast a long shadow over the enchanted spectacle of a spring day.

Then she says: "To what purpose this reddening of the grass"? Is she referring to a loss of her own blood or to sun that shines on the grass like wild fire? She presents the readers with dark thoughts full of sorrow and despair. She detaches herself from reality with intention of covering the pain in the hope to find an answer in the beauties of nature. At the same time she has no control over her feelings and continues describing her heavy loneliness all the way to the end of her poem when she feels that the moon should stayed away from her room and shined its magical

light over a happier soul. It is amazing that as a teenager Liu had the talent to write in such creative and powerful way. She has an innate ability to compose poetry and it is something that comes natural to her like the flow of water in a stream.

The second line of poem two reads: “Now my grief is about to be doubled” is the awareness and wakeup call for Liu who knows that time is not merciful as inexorably passes through her life and through the euphoria of a spring day. Liu induce herself through detachment as a way to deal with the struggle of the absence of the man she is in love with. In fact, Ellen Widmer and Kang-i San Cheng in their book “*Writing Women in Late Imperial China*” emphasize that: “Courtesans are sometimes presented as being those most capable of detaching themselves from sensuous existence precisely because they have lived it to the full”.⁵⁰ And Liu Rushi is a notable example visible through her poem. Some Chinese scholars assert that some courtesans toward the end of their lives ended up living as Buddhist nuns because this unique ability of detachment that most women didn’t possess. Liu’s detachment in a way reveals her interiority of self-redemption and the need to express through her poetry that fact that she transcended her role as an object of desire and become talented poetess and accomplished wife. Her marriage to Qian Qianyi (1582-1664) was not just a way for her to become famous and change status. It was a true love affair and an intellectual marriage. According to Wai-Yee Li in his article *Heroic Transformations: Women and National Trauma in Early Qing Literature*, “The union of Qian Qianyi and Liu Rushi was one of the most celebrated love affairs between courtesans and scholar-poets. In defiance of his wife’s clan and public opinion, Qian married Liu in 1641 with ceremonies proper to a principal wife, and regarded it as one of his greatest achievements”.⁵¹ As courtesan Liu was able to enhance her reputation and social status as

exemplary wife and through literary pursuit excel in poetry and the arts in order to gain social recognition and improve her status.

Courtesan Wang Wei (1600-1664) was another very talented and prolific writer who, like Liu Rushi, managed to become a gentry woman by marrying prominent male literate Xu Yuqing. Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy in their anthology of “*Women Writers of Traditional China*” point out that Wang Wei portrayed herself as “*Daoist Master in a Straw Coat*”⁵² an attribute related to the fact that she made nature the focus of her poetry and the Dao the center of her life. Wang Wei was a representative of a courtesan culture that contributed to a better functioning society by bringing together the private and public lives of male elites. When elite men were not occupied with their government jobs, they enjoyed spending time in literary clubs where also elite women participated and exchanged their writing works. Liu Rushi and her husband scholar and writer Qian Qianyi, included Wang Wei’s poetry in their “*Collected Poems of the Successive Reigns*,” and describe her as a Buddhist writer and a “lady scholar” (*nushi*) an honorary title that according to Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang “had been a prerogative of the respectable domestic woman before it was appropriated for the courtesan”.⁵³

During the High Qing era, as the respectability and recognition of educated woman grew, the meaning of *nushi* shifted from referring to social location to that of learning. Wang Wei was a traveler who loved to seek the companionship and solitude of a mountain or a river site as inspiration for her poetry. One of her friends, Tan Youxia, (1583-1637) appreciated her qualities as writer and poetess and stated: “In her verse there are words from the streets, words from the female chambers, and words from the Dao”.⁵⁴ With this statement Tan emphasized the fact that Wang was a unique woman who had concerns for everybody and who made the Dao the principle of her life. Dorothy Ko described Wang Wei as a woman who loved to travel for her

own well being and to acquire intellectual and literary maturity. In describing her love for traveling Ko states: “Traveling is thus an act of constant renewal, addictive because of the never-ending promise of yet another discovery. And, as an authentic experience known only to the traveler herself, it is also an expression and fulfillment of her individuality”.⁵⁵ What she experienced when she travelled affected her writing because her close connection with nature helped her in achieving a more defined and complete poetry: nature was very inspiring and soothing for her mind and also gave her a chance to meditate on the beauty of her surroundings.

When she couldn’t travel because she was sick and homebound Wang describe herself in this way: “By nature I belong to the wilderness; I grew up to be as unrestrained as a soaring eagle. Little did I know that such a fate would befall me”.⁵⁶ To Wang freedom, more than going from one place to another, was freedom of thinking and in a way she sympathized with the majority of women who lived in the inner chambers whose literary experiences were limited. Her poetry is unique because it is a testimony of her spiritual maturity and her achievement as a woman writer that gave her freedom and opened up new ways of thinking beside the fact that she was an object of desire and sensual indulgence for men.

Wang defines poetry in her own words: “During the time left from my devotions and sutra reciting, every word and every chant that came upon me, be it in remembrance of flowers in rain or longing for waters and mountains, arose from inspirational gusto [*xing*] and ended as expressions of my heart [*ji yi*]”.⁵⁷ Wang’s delicate prose and her spiritual connection with nature can be seen in her poem “Inscribing a Poem on The Dream for Wang Ranming”:

Emotion is the root of dreams;
The emotion maybe be real, but the dreams are mostly unreal.
Not that dreams can be indistinct,

For indistinctness generates even more shapes.
 You, Master, are one who has forgotten emotions,
 Alone awakened from where others are stuck.
 Would you, for no reason in the spring,
 Let a dream wander and flutter?
 In the dream and in the heart—
 It is one or it is two?
 Reading you “Dream” poems in my boat on the lake
 Makes me understand the reach of emotion.
 At this moment the setting moon is here;
 All around is a stretch of emerald drizzle.
 The arousal and dispersal of dreams
 Both depend on the pearl blossoms”.⁵⁸

At the beginning of her poem she states that “Emotion is the root of dreams” and because dreams are connected to each other they have the potential to make someone happy or sad. Dreams can be indistinct or have real shapes sometimes but this is what makes them so unique, when they start taking real forms these represent fears and insecurities. Through the lines is visible a sense of interior response to the exterior world to which the author is deeply connected. Her spiritual connection with nature reveals a strong woman who has learned through the detachment how to live a minimalist life finding meaning and truthfulness “where others are stuck”. Being a devoted Buddhist, Wang knows that there is no reality in the real world and she is at peace with herself and her emotions. The author has chosen a hermitic style of poetry that shows her detachment as a conscious and powerful way of dealing with her life. Her words at the same time have the potential to grab the reader’s attention and invite to contemplate its meaning. When she writes: “You Master, are one who has forgotten emotions, Alone awakened from where others are stuck” she refers to her friend poet and patron of the arts Wang Ranming who was well known for entertaining literati and introduced courtesans and female writers to each others. According to Daria Berg, Wang Wei was a frequent presence in the literary circle of Wang Ranming where she manifested her poetry and enjoyed share her writing experience with

others.⁵⁹ Wang calls Ranming “Master” to show her respect and devotion for a male writer superior to her. The fact that she is aware of the gap between the two sexes does not diminish her role as a female writer but actually put it in a more creative context from which she derives her aura.

Wang is an amazing writer who is capable to change someone’s emotions by showing that dreams come true sometimes and while the reader wonders if her poetry makes sense she continues writing with passionate gracefulness and distinctive character. As a courtesan Wang wants to show women and men as well, that there are no limits through writing and the possibilities are endless. These possibilities are words that in powerful hands can become tools of communication and self redemption and being a woman is never a limitation. She concludes her delightful poem by saying: “All around is a stretch of emerald drizzle. The arousal and dispersal of dreams both depend on the pearl blossoms” show that although we are limited in our existence, dreams still have the power to break the chains of our conscripted thinking and let us live as soaring eagles. Through her writing and her spiritual experience as a Buddhist Wang achieves transformation from an object of desire into the one of a capable and recognized writer.

Conclusion

By the time China made the transition to the Qing dynasty only a few women had acquired reputations as outstanding poetesses. The Qing empire with its cosmopolitan culture gave these women room for possibilities and a path by which they could transcend their inner chambers and explore and nurture writing as a tool of communication and expression of their feelings and thoughts. The cosmopolitan culture of the Qing empire greatly contributed to the development of aesthetics and the arts and women did not miss the chance to have their voices heard in the male dominant society in which they were living. Armed with a powerful brush in their hands, women proved to the world and most of all to themselves, that they had the determination, the potential and the will to become capable writers and it was their inner passion that stirred up their creativity and gave them the opportunity to put in words their thoughts and emotions. Each one of these women discovered their own voice through their writing, and was able to use their writing as a path to social advancement by marrying men of the aristocracy and bureaucracy.

Shang Jinglan and Wang Duanshu were two remarkable capable women of the gentry class and Liu Rushi and Wang Wei belonged to the class of courtesans and all shared a common passion for writing in the form of poetry. Their legacy became an inspiration to later generations of women writers because they did not break society's rule of subordination to men in order to pursue their literary skills. In fact, these women conformed to family guidelines and values ethics of moral behavior, rituals and discipline and most of all put filial piety at the center of their lives. These women also knew that they were still bound to traditional roles and rules and as they grew up they realized that the only reasons for living was their responsibility as carriers of the male blood line and their destiny to marry in a hierarchy created for obedience and subordination.

Their parents bound their feet so they could have better marriages which they arranged and sold them to powerful men of the bureaucracy without their consent.

Throughout China's history women had always been raised in preparation for their wedding day and when the practice of foot binding became a necessary requirement for that day, they sadly accepted the forced and submissive condition. However, having their feet bound didn't prevent these women from pursuing their writing vocation like Wang Wei did throughout her career as poetess. The debate over the concept of women's education and learning put Chinese scholars on different sides of the battle field. Chinese scholar Lu Kun was a strong supporter of women's education for example, but Yuan Mei viewed women's education as being for the purpose of performing their house duties better and instructing their children, especially sons. During the High Qing era women were still kept and guarded inside the chambers of their household, and only a few, such as courtesans, had a more open relationship with the outside world. These few women became successful when had the chance to marry into elite families where they expanded their writing skills and were supported by male poets and writers who introduced them in literary clubs. In addition, such women writers were able to have their poems appreciated and publicized and became available to a broader audience of women and men too. Women knew that their primary roles were to become respectable wives and dutiful daughters to obey a powerful mother-in-law. Shang Jinglan explains the duties of her daughters-in-law in a beautiful letter she sent to them encouraging them by telling them how writing could be pursued to enhance a woman's talent and self cultivation.

Gender and gender roles continued to shape the lives of Chinese women and their decisions about remarrying if widowed affected their literary work as seen in the case of Shang Jinglan and Wang Duanshu. Both were capable talented writers but Shang chose to remain a

widow while Wang decided to remarry and because of her choice she was considered a less virtuous woman than Shang although her poetry was of higher literary quality. During the High Qing era the Chinese male society accepted the new model of scholarly woman and did not reject their poetry whether it came from a chaste woman or a promiscuous one like the case of courtesans but at the same time kept a line of demarcation when they had to decide who was virtuous and who was not. Women writers of the High Qing reached their golden age because were able to demonstrate that they had the capability to be good house wives, teachers for their children and poetesses at the same time. Young girls who were born in elite families had better chances to succeed as writers because the stability and security that came from being in a wealthy environment. These women had their poetry sponsored because they found the right connections within the male circles in social and literary clubs and education empowered them through self-expression and participation in the elite culture. Women of lower classes and status or peasants, who were able to write, enjoyed exchanging letters and simple poems with female friends and family.

Women writers of this time were able to step out of their domestic domain and boldly demonstrate that they were capable of challenging the chambers of gender, class and a male dominant society with their literary work because they believed in their talent and inspired later generations of women writers. It became important for them to define their own voices because men had defined the gender for centuries. The valorization of women's poetry is related to the fact that men greatly enjoyed not only their company but their brains too and both women and men shared their literary excellence and their freedom from their own domains whether was the household or the work place. Women through their poetry acquired a new consciousness, a sense of responsibility and the chance to represent the world in a new light. The fact that women

poetesses found in poetry a new tool of self-expression stems from the need to achieve intellectual gratification and the need of expressing a new role in society of the “writing woman”. The elite woman writer and the courtesan of the High Qing era did not struggle to keep their heads above the water because they played their cards well and knew when to make a smart move which they did for example, by using their literary goals for the pursuit of marriage.

Endnotes

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³⁵ Susan, Mann, "Widows in the Kingship: Class, and Community Structure of Qing Dynasty China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 1 (February 1987): 37-56, 37.

³⁶ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 426.

³⁷ Chang and Saussy, *Women Writers of Traditional China*, 363.

³⁸ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 447.

³⁹ Ho. *The Cultivation of Female Talent*, 200.

⁴⁰ de Bary and Lufrano, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 56.

⁴¹ Daria Berg, *Reading China Fiction, History and the Dynamics of Discourse: Essays in Honour of Professor Glen Dudbridge*. Koninklijke NV, Leiden: Brill, 2007, 273.

⁴² Grace Fong, *Herself an Author*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008, 54.

⁴³ Mann, *Precious Records*, 128.

⁴⁴ Fong, *Herself an Author*, 62.

⁴⁵ Berg, *Reading China Fiction*, 268, 269.

⁴⁶ Chang and Saussy, *Women Writers of Traditional China*, 350.

⁴⁷ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 272.

⁴⁸ Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 377.

⁴⁹ Berg, *Reading China Fiction*, 272.

⁵⁰ Ellen Widmer And Kang-i Sun Chang, *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, 71.

⁵¹ Wai-Yee Li, "Heroic Transformations: Women and national trauma in early Qing literature," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 59, no. 2 (December 1999): 363, 394.

⁵² Chang and Saussy, *Women Writers of Traditional China*, 320.

⁵³ Widmer and Chang, *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, 80.

⁵⁴ Widmer and Chang, *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, 81.

⁵⁵ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 286.

⁵⁶ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 286.

⁵⁷ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 287.

⁵⁸ Chang and Saussy, *Women Writers of Traditional China*, 321.

⁵⁹ Daria Berg, *Reading China Fiction*, 282.

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