a natural first audience among scholars of Chinese women's history, but its broader tackling of the issues of how cultural forms and cultural producers maintain relevancy in rapidly changing socio-political worlds is of interest to a broad historical and literary readership—including scholars of intellectual history, material culture, print culture, and literature. Very few books consciously look both backwards and forwards in time and for this reason alone *Different Worlds of Discourse* is an important work. It will be a first reference for all students and scholars of late Qing and early twentieth-century China.

Louise Edwards
University of Technology Sydney

Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China. By Grace S. Fong. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008. Pp. xi + 238. $55.00.

Grace Fong's *Herself an Author* is an important contribution to the growing and lively scholarship on women in late imperial China. Her close readings of texts (some of them exceedingly rare until she found them) illuminate ideas of authorship, subjectivity, and agency among women writers in late imperial China, as her subtitle suggests they will. Her commitment to close readings is demonstrated by the book's inclusion of the original Chinese texts of each poem she discusses. Not only does this serve an important rhetorical role in the book, underlining the importance of language itself, it has an important pedagogic value, for oneself as well as for one's students. Fong is an erudite and graceful translator, and reading the originals and her translations in parallel is a pleasurable and productive exercise. The book contains three appendices with complete translations of some of the key texts; this too adds to the depth and utility of the book. Fong refers to the work she has done uncovering texts as a "long-term archaeological endeavour" (p. ix) and the fields of Chinese literature and women's studies are indebted to her for that work. Fong and her colleagues have posted a large corpus of texts on a website which is a collaboration between the McGill and Harvard-Yenching libraries (http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/MINGQING/english/index.htm). The website is searchable in many dimensions (author, book title, genre, ethnic group, geographical region); it is not an exaggeration to say that it has the potential to transform work on Chinese women writers and as well as every topic to which women writing is relevant. Readers who do not know this website are urged to familiarize themselves with it immediately.

But the archaeological work, however important, is a precursor to the main work of this book, which seeks to find modes of reading and evaluating Chinese women's poetry. Fong finds common cause with the critic Isobel Armstrong (writing about another group

of women poets) when Armstrong writes, "We are discovering who they are, but there are few ways of talking about them" (p. 2). One of Fong's key questions is: "What did poetry 'do' for them that so many of them formed lifetime habits of, even obsessions with, writing?" (p. 4) She is interested in explicating the connection "between writing and structures of desire and agency" (ibid.). Fong has identified agency as the most useful theoretical concept to use in thinking about women writers in traditional China. She tells us that agency is "the ability and will to take action purposefully and self-consciously and is imbricated with concepts like 'selfhood,' 'individuality,' and 'subjecthood.'" She goes on to say that "in this study I draw on agency for its theoretical potential to shed light on the interstices between subjection and subjectivity, a space homologous to the (self-) positioning of historical women" (p. 5). She suggests that writing opens up subject positions for women other than those of kinship—that a poet may well be a fine wife and mother, but a careful reading of her poetry will able us to see her in other dimensions, and will enable us to see how she saw herself in other dimensions (ibid.). The ambitious claims of the introduction are by and large met; the concept of agency always troubles me a bit—the root meaning of "agent" is after all someone who acts on behalf of someone else. It is true that this is a word that in its theoretical operations has come some distance from its original meaning, but the original meaning continues to have a haunting presence. But Fong is clear about what she means, and the theoretical apparatus she actually applies to the works is subtle and nuanced.

The first chapter, entitled "A Life in Poetry: The Auto/biography of Gan Lirou (1743–1819)" takes as its focus the remarkable Gan Lirou 甘立媃 whose poetic corpus, collected in the *Yongxuelou gao* 詠雪樓稿, consists of more than a thousand poems. When she was seventy-four, Gan assembled a series of autobiographic poems she had written over the course of her life. In a preface she tells us why she wrote: "When I encountered misfortunes, separations, and the deaths of my kin and personally went through difficulties and dangers, I dared not tell others. But when I truly experienced things that I could not speak out completely, I entrusted them one by one to my songs. I was just writing my heart/mind, articulating my intent" (p. 13). Her son published the collection, but not until twenty years after his mother's death. Gan Lirou organizes her life story in four life stages which she entitled "Drafts after Embroidering," "Drafts Written after Cooking," "Drafts by the One Who Has Not Yet Died," and "Drafts by One Who Lives in Retirement with Her Son."

The social life which absorbs Gan Lirou is her immediate family, which is not surprising. What is a bit surprising is the relative absence of her children from these poems, an absence we see in other contemporary texts, such as Shen Fu's 沈復 *Fusheng liuji* 浮生六記, where in an otherwise intimate portrait of a marriage children do not appear until their adolescence. Fong explains the relative lack of interest in children in Gan's poetic autobiography as stemming from the fact that children are not *zhiyin* 知音 (which Fong felicitously translates as "someone who understands the tone"). Poetry is written to those who understand one, and, as Fong writes, "uncomprehending children are

thus not ideal addressees" (p. 30). This is by and large convincing, but there are of course exceptions, such as the lovely poems Gan addresses to her five-year old granddaughter, in which she speaks of looking up from her needlework and missing the child. The point about *zhiyin* is an important one, and helps us piece together the puzzle of the dynamic interactions between genre and narrative in autobiographical writing.

It is worth noting here that Gan Lirou paints a portrait of her dead husband "for the descendants to see" (p. 35). It is not just through words that she constructs her subjectivity. Fong also tells us (in a footnote) that Gan, trained as a painter, also painted her mother-in-law after she died (p. 185, n. 91). These portraits (which seem no longer to be extant) suggest the importance of visual representation in at least some élite families.

Gan Lirou is an exceptional woman, and the temptation is to quote at great length from the poetry, but I will restrain myself to citing one which shows her fundamental restlessness with gender constraints. When in her twenties, Gan composed the following poem:

I want to inherit the osmanthus of Mount Yan,	欲襲燕山桂
My three elder brothers and one younger brother all came first in the examinations.	
But, wearing skirt and hairpin, my aspirations are in vain.	裙釵志枉然
The line of wild geese reaches the clouds in order,	凌雲連雁序
I hope to join in the destiny in the next life.	期結再生緣

The osmanthus of Mount Yan refers to success in the civil service examinations. The next line is a piece of self-commentary. Self-commentary is conventional among Chinese poets; one of the things it does is bring another authorial voice into the dynamic interplay between reader, writer, and commentator. Gan's discontent with the limitations placed on her by gender did not dissipate with age; in a poem written on her seventieth birthday with the title "Composed on My Seventieth Birthday for Myself, also to Thank the Various Gentlemen Who Presented Me with Poems" she begins by asking: "Why, I ask, when I was first given life/Was I made into a woman?" (p. 49)

The next chapter "From the Margin to the Center: The Literary Vocation of Concubines" discusses writing by several concubines before settling on a focus on Shen Cai 沈彩 (b. 1752), whose portrait graces the cover of *Herself An Author*. (The illustration is taken from the frontispiece of Shen's collection, *Chunyulou ji* 春雨樓集, from a painting by Wang Liang 汪亮; colour was added by Lin Fan and Margaret Ng. The decision to colour the illustration is interesting; one would have liked to hear more about that decision.) The general conclusions Fong reaches about concubines and what they write are not surprising; they write even less about their children than do wives and their work shows a weaker link with the family—not only do they rarely write about their children, they almost never write about visits home to their natal families (p. 59). Fong

also argues that "concubines were able to exploit their marginal placement in the side room to construct subject positions that appear freer from orthodox constraints of female modesty in emotional expression than were permitted principal wives" (p. 66). Fong is perfectly aware that one might argue that this freedom from constraint is precisely what men expected in their concubines. She notes that Shen Cai employs erotic imagery from poems by men and asks "But is this imitation self-objectification or self-representation?" (p. 76) It is a key question, and one that it is nearly impossible to answer.

Fong approaches answering this question in her close reading of texts. She writes that while Shen Cai writes in a boudoir-erotic mode, "she textualizes the boudoir environment into an energized, productive space" (p. 81). A number of her poems are playfully subversive of the eroticism of the boudoir. In a song lyric to the tune "Wang Jiangnan" 望江南 entitled "Playfully on the Bound Feet" 戲咏纏足 she writes:

How ridiculous!	無謂甚
To bend the long jade bows.	竟屈玉弓長
So tightly bound they grow an underside like a crab.	牢縛生臍渾似蟹
Spread out those delicate toes in a row—they're not as good as ginger root.	朗排纖指不如薑
What flavor are they? I ask you, young lover.	何味問檀郎

The crab-like feet are perhaps aesthetically unappealing, but the addition of the ginger root, not to mention the pointed question to the young lover, suggest that the visual may not be the domain in which the feet are most appealing. I read the song lyric, following Fong, as a critique of the practice of footbinding (it is "ridiculous"), an affirmation of its eroticism (the addressee is the "young lover"), and a humorous take on the materiality of the bound feet (they resemble crab and ginger). This multiple vision of her subject gives Shen's song lyrics strength and resonance.

The third chapter "Authoring Journeys: Women on the Road" looks at a variety of women travellers and the records that they kept. Fong suggests that "the selected poems all share certain common motifs found in travel poems by both men and women. The manipulation of the same or similar images and motifs can produce quite different intellectual and emotional effects, however, when inflected by gender, as well as by age, social status, and other contingencies" (p. 88). In the conclusion to this chapter Fong returns to her analytical construct and explicates how makes agency is exhibited by the travelling women writers—to produce order, in the case of the concubine Li Yin 李因 (1616–1685), to fulfil wifely duties in the face of extreme difficulty, in the case of the widow Xing Cijing 邢慈靜 (*fl.* late sixteenth century) (pp. 119–20). It is in this chapter that the ahistorical nature of the book is most jarring. I understand arguments against the tyranny of temporal organization (despite my own disciplinary location as a historian) but it seems to me that in a book where a part of the argument has to do with the construction of lineages of readers and writers, chronology matters. One would have liked to see Fong

add time to the list of contingencies which change the meaning of images and motifs listed above; a statement made in the sixteenth century has a different valence than would the same statement made in the eighteenth century.

The final chapter, "Gender and Reading: Form, Rhetoric, and Community in Women's Poetic Criticism" suggests that the work of women as critics and anthologizers of one another's work "expresses a sense of themselves as belonging to a gendered community that transcends family, age, class, and region" (p. 122). Fong notes a tendency toward different practice between male and female anthologists—men anthologize a broad chronological sweep, whereas female anthologizers tended to include women of their own dynasties, giving particular attention to their contemporaries, which suggests that the anthologies by women "give a greater sense of women's poetry as a living culture in which the compilers were participants" (p. 130). She concludes in her chapter on women as readers noting that female critics tended to use the concepts *xingling* 性靈 and *xingqing* 性情 "which emphasize native sensibility, natural emotions, and spontaneous inspiration in their critical discourse—whether in letters, poems, or critical anthologies—to assert their own and each other's place in poetic practice and, by extension, in literary culture and tradition." She argues that "their self-conscious critical practice constituted attempts to carve a space of their own, to construct successfully—in Elaine Showalter's famous phrase—'a literature of their own' in the cultural tradition of late imperial China" (p. 158). The tradition does not exist independently of the tradition of male writers, but it has its own structures, its own poetics, and its own vocabulary. And of course the clearest evidence that these writers thought of themselves as being in a tradition is the anthologies themselves, which documented and constructed that tradition.

Fong is a sophisticated careful reader, and she has written a literary history which is author-centred, which addresses the question "Why did she write poetry?" rather than "How good is this poem?" The audience for this terrific book should include not just scholars interested in Chinese women and literature, but those interested in questions of why people write and why people read. Not only has Grace Fong found new texts for us, she is showing us new ways of reading them.

Ann B. Waltner
University of Minnesota