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Politics, Poetics, and Gender in Late Qing China: Xue Shaohui and the Era of Reform. By Nanxiu Qian. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii + 376. $65.00.

Joseph Levenson famously observed that intellectual history is not just the study of thought but of men [*sic*] thinking. Thought can, in theory, be abstracted from its context, but people do not think or write outside of time and space; they frame and are framed by their times and circumstances.[1] Nanxiu Qian's *Politics, Poetics, and Gender in Late Qing China* offers us an account of one woman thinking: Xue Shaohui 薛紹徽 (1866–1911), an educator, poet, essayist, and translator active in the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth.

What Xue thought, and wrote, suggests that Levenson may have gotten some things wrong in his magisterial study *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*. As the nineteenth century came to a close, thinkers did not move from a traditional valorization of Chinese civilization as the repository of universal value to an embrace of modernity and nationalism in which "tradition" was so much instrumental window-dressing. For Xue and her reform-minded contemporaries, both men and women, China's history provided a repertoire of value that could be creatively combined with resources drawn from (mainly) Europe and America, past and present, in order to fashion a liveable future for the gravely imperilled Chinese empire. But Qian shows us that Levenson, if we make a minor adjustment for gender, was right about something important: the study of a woman thinking allows us to understand a historical moment in a way that the study of disembodied thought does not. By exploring Xue Shaohui's writing as it emerged from a particular family and intellectual community, Nanxiu Qian opens up a moment and a process in which Chinese intellectuals imagined "bringing the world home," as Ted Huters has phrased it,[2] and also began to remake home by staking a claim on the wider world. For Xue Shaohui, no one had a bigger stake or more experience in the endeavour of remaking home than women.

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Xue Shaohui was born in Fuzhou. According to family lore she narrowly escaped being given away when her father learned through divination that she would grow up to be a scholar of significant accomplishment. A locally famous poet at 13, married at 14, she became a member of an elite cultural network of Fujian intellectuals

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[1] Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1968).

[2] Theodore Huters, *Bringing the World Home: Appropriating the West in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

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including Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921), Lin Shu 林紓 (1852–1924), and Chen Baochen 陳寶琛 (1848–1935). Fuzhou, one of the first treaty ports, was the home of a naval arsenal and academy that "produced a great many naval officers, scientists, engineers, translators, diplomats, and, above all, reformers" (p. 11). Among them were Xue's brother-in-law Chen Jitong 陳季同 (1852–1907), who spent sixteen years in Europe as a Qing diplomat (returning with two French wives), and Xue's husband Chen Shoupeng 陳壽彭 (1857–*c.* 1928), who did a briefer stint in Europe and was active in late Qing politics. Xue herself first emerged into public visibility in 1897 in Shanghai, where she and her extended family became active in a campaign for women's education. She went on to a distinguished career as a translator, poet, and essayist before her death at the age of 45.

Qian argues that attention to Xue's work broadens and reperiodizes how we understand nonstate reform activity in the last years of the Qing. It was not limited to the bold political proposals presented in Beijing during the famous 100 Days of Reform in 1898, but rather began in the 1860s, extended well beyond the capital, encompassed many facets of social and cultural life, was shaped by the writings of women as well as men, and continued in other forms after the best-known reformers were executed or forced into exile.

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Qian characterizes Xue Shaohui and other late Qing women reformers as "active, optimistic, autonomous, and self-sufficient agents of reform" (p. 9), not the passive, ignorant, cloistered and benighted creatures whom Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) named as a central feature of China's enfeebled economy and polity.[3] Xue took explicit issue with Liang Qichao's characterization, arguing that some women in China had long been educated and that a reformed version of that education could serve China well in its current moment. In particular, Xue responded to Liang's assertion that women who wrote poetry were wasting their time on trivialities as China sank into abjection. Building on a long tradition of women writing in Fujian (Min 閩), extending back to the mid-1600s, Xue argued for the contemporary relevance of a much older figure: the *xianyuan* 賢媛 women of the Wei-Jin era (220–420 C.E.) who possessed "literary and artistic talent, broad learning, intellectual independence, moral capacity, and good judgment" (p. 14), and who were well suited to travel beyond the women's chambers even as they fulfilled their responsibilities within the home.

Chapter 1 opens with Xue's early claim on what Qian calls "the Min writing-women culture" and the figure of the *xianyuan*, made in poetic form when Xue was a newly married fifteen-year-old. She continued to identify with this writing-women

[3] Liang Qichao, "Lun nüxue" 論女學 (On education for women), *Shiwu bao* 時務報 23 (12 April 1897), pp. 1a–4a; 25 (2 May 1897), pp. 1a–2b.

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culture throughout her life, arguing that the original *xianyuan* poets had possessed both talent and virtue and could be appropriate models for the present moment. Women should not be required to give up poetry for practical matters, Xue believed; the two were intertwined. Her own poetry offered acerbic commentary on contemporary politics and ideas for thoroughgoing reform, and she expanded her writing beyond the genre of poetry to encompass educational proposals, arguments for women's rights, and translations introducing exemplary Western women and science to a Chinese readership. For Xue, responding to the challenges of foreign aggression along the China coast did not require elite writing women to jettison one of their most powerful weapons: their poetry.

Chapter 2 describes the new cultural mix introduced to Fujian by the establishment of the Fuzhou Navy Yard 福州船政局 in the late 1860s. At first glance an exclusively male realm where men were educated in warfare, diplomacy, and foreign languages, the Navy Yard turns out to have had important effects on the intellectual world of elite women through what Qian calls the "marriage" of Min writing-women culture with Fuzhou Navy Yard culture, embodied quite literally in couples such as Xue Shaohui and her husband Chen Shoupeng. Naval Academy 船政學堂 students studied science and technology alongside the Confucian classics, and were active in local poetry networks. Xue's brother-in-law, Chen Jitong, was sent to Europe as a new graduate in the 1870s and instructed to study international relations and law, history, literature, and European languages in France; he consistently identified himself as a man of letters. While in Europe he wrote several popular books in French introducing Chinese literature and politics, as well as one volume on his observations of French life. He established himself as "an advocate of Chinese culture" (p. 76) who consistently emphasized the contributions of learned women to that culture, implying that in this respect, Chinese culture was superior to its Western counterparts. On his return to China, he founded a reform journal dedicated to introducing Western law and republican democracy, topics that later became central themes in Xue Shaohui's writings. Chen Jitong also translated the guarantees in the Napoleonic Code about free-choice marriage, a wife's equal status within marriage, and a woman's right to divorce (p. 84). Qian notes that for Fuzhou Naval Academy graduates, the encounter with the West was not animated exclusively by a concern for the nation's "wealth and power" but by an attraction to "liberty, democracy, and gender equality" (p. 84).

Chapter 3, "A Marriage between the Two Cultures," looks at the worldly knowledge that sojourning Naval Academy men brought home from Europe and the ways that Fuzhou women incorporated it into their writing and political engagements. Xue's marriage to Chen Shoupeng, as reflected in her poetry, was full of passionate attachment leavened by humour, as in the poem entitled "Yiru [Shoupeng's *zi*] and His Friends Tried the *Fuluan* [spirit-writing] Divination, and Most of the Immortals

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Summoned Were Female" (p. 91). She demanded fidelity from him when he departed just months after the birth of their son to spend three years in Europe. Her poems record her growing awareness of the world beyond China, nurtured by gifts and historical explanations he sent home during his sojourn. Allusions to French political events began to appear in her poetry, as did descriptions of his experiments making wine and ice cream after his return. In the early 1890s, Xue lived in a joint household with her French sisters-in-law raising children together in Fuzhou while the Chen brothers worked for the Qing government in the north. She recorded the family's despair over China's defeat in the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese War as well.

Chapter 4 examines a cluster of reform projects in which Xue Shaohui, her husband, and her Chinese and French in-laws played a central role. The Shanghai campaign for women's education of 1897–98 led to the establishment of the Chinese Girls' School 中國女學堂, which operated for two years before closing in the difficult environment after the suppression of the 1898s reforms. Closely associated with the campaign were the Women's Study Society 女學會 and the first Chinese women's journal, the *Nü xuebao* 女學報 of 1898, which ran for about three months with Xue Shaohui as a principal contributor. The journal, with an all-women editorial board, was a vigorous advocate for women's rights and education, also publishing pioneering articles on the tens of thousands of women factory workers in Shanghai's textile and tea factories. In one of her earlier pieces about Xue, Qian set out to establish that this journal, "the mother *Nü xuebao*," was in fact more feminist (if less revolutionary) than its better-known 1902 successor "the daughter *Nü xuebao*."[4] In the present volume, however, Qian is less concerned with securing Xue's place as the "first woman who" and more concerned with situating her in a vibrant community of men and women scholars who aimed to create a new polity under a constitutional monarchy, drawing upon resources within and beyond China.

Qian sees gendered differences in that community, with men (following Liang Qichao) portraying uneducated women as a drag on the economy. Women, in contrast, emphasized that some among them had always been educated, and that they could play a much expanded role if they could "transcend the limits of the kitchen" to reach an "understanding of the entire realm under heaven" (p. 130). Qian points out that many notions of women's rights first voiced by Xue and other women writers during this period were later taken up—unattributed—by the New Culture movement (1915–25).

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[4] Nanxiu Qian, "The Mother *Nü Xuebao* versus the Daughter *Nü Xuebao*: Generational Differences between 1898 and 1902 Women Reformers," in *Different Worlds of Discourse: Transformations of Gender and Genre in Late Qing and Early Republican China*, ed. Nanxiu Qian, Grace S. Fong, and Richard J. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 257–91.

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In the years after the 1898 reforms were brought to a sudden end by the Qing court, Xue Shaohui and Chen Shoupeng turned their attention to translation of Western works. These included biographies of foreign women (Chapter 5), culled from many different sources, and Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (Chapter 6). Their method was for Shoupeng to read the original works in European languages and translate orally, while Xue transformed his words into exquisitely crafted Chinese. The *Biographies of Foreign Women* 外國列女傳, which occupied the couple for many evenings from 1899 to 1903, was the occasion for some disagreements between them. Xue preferred to categorize the women by moral virtues and append evaluations of their behaviour, while Chen (whose view prevailed) classified women by professions and eschewed moral judgments. Qian argues that Xue was nonetheless eager to introduce Chinese readers to novel cultural practices: Western women's movement through public space, political activism, fiction writing, companionate marriages, and even divorce. Xue made editorial choices that familiarized her heroines for Chinese readers: Athena appeared in a Confucian scholar's turban rather than a warrior helmet, while Venus contributed to conjugal harmony rather than erotic abandon. In the Jules Verne translation, Xue transformed "a foreign work of science fiction into a conventional Chinese novel" (p. 195) that was also a geography textbook, introducing Chinese readers to foreign cities and social practices and amplifying the text with annotations on suttee (sati) and Mormonism. She also gave the rescued Indian widow Aouda an amplified role and more individual agency than Verne had done in the original.

By 1911, the year of Xue's death from illness, the monarchy had been discarded as a viable political form, but Qian shows us that the urgent turn-of-the-century discussions about how to remake China represent more than a historical cul-de-sac. It was not only the science and technology emanating from the Fuzhou Naval Yard that continued to be important into the twentieth century and beyond. Equally crucial were the processes of cultural brokering, reworking, and appropriation that Xue and her intellectual cohort of women and men developed. Qian bemoans the loss of Xue's approach to broad cultural synthesis in twentieth-century China, as nationalism and revolution became the dominant themes of political life, but in fact the creative project of "bringing the world home" continued to animate many in China, even when its earliest practitioners were disavowed or forgotten.

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Nanxiu Qian masterfully reconstructs the world of Xue Shaohui. Xue's every argument was built upon a dense intertextual foundation of historical and literary references from the Chinese classical canon. Explicating Xue's work requires erudition equal to that of Xue herself, and here Qian's broad knowledge of poetic allusions

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is indispensable. Chapter 1 is a challenging read, given the complex genealogy of the Min writing-women culture, but across the book's eight chapters Qian is an able guide to a carefully curated selection of Xue's 300 poems, 150 song-lyrics, and 20 parallel-prose essays (p. 17). Equally impressive is Qian's ability to enter into the global fin-de-siècle world of China. She draws us into the process by which a curious and ambitious woman scholar could invoke Jules Verne, Charlotte Corday, Hypatia, and a host of other figures from literature, history, and myth to develop lessons for an attentive elite reading audience. Qian is a sure-footed guide to the extremely complex late Qing intellectual environment in which Xue lived and for which she wrote.

Precisely because Qian's research is so assiduous and her readings so perceptive, it is important to take stock of what we do not, and cannot, know about the life of a prolific and articulate elite woman of the late Qing. Xue was unusually forthright about discussing changes in her own views, companionate disagreements with her husband, and admiration for her elder sister and her brother-in-law Chen Jitong. Her writings (detailed in Chapter 7) on how a wife and mother should behave—down to her design of gender-specific curricula for her children—allow us to see how she envisioned distinct roles for men and women, while positioning herself as the arbiter of both. She emerges in her writing as a woman with a wry sense of humour and a passionate desire to teach and improve the lot of those around her under rapidly changing and dangerous circumstances.

Yet questions remain that the paper trail cannot clarify. How did the fourteen-year-old Xue, left motherless at eight, orphaned at eleven, and raised under the guidance of an older sister, feel about the marriage proposal of a man nine years her senior, also orphaned as a young child, both of them acting with a degree of autonomy unusual for the times? How and when did her ideas about companionate marriage emerge? In what ways were those ideas shaped by what Qian calls the "writing-women" culture of Fujian, or by the worlds her husband introduced to her through letters he wrote from Europe and reading recommendations? Most intriguing of all, how did she navigate the dissonances between her own beliefs and the practices of her beloved extended family? How did she reconcile her distaste for concubinage with her deep regard for her brother-in-law Chen Jitong, and his two French wives, all of whom she knew well? (His first wife, who was Chinese, had died at her natal home during his years in Europe, long after he had taken up with Maria-Adèle Landarchet in Paris.) Or her personal lack of enthusiasm for footbinding with her public declaration that it was unimportant, a personal matter, and should not be used to criticize Chinese women as parasitic and confined? How did she reconcile her disappointment and fear at the violent end to the 1898 reforms, and her growing criticism of the Qing court (as recorded in essays and poems discussed in Chapter 8) with her husband's continued career as a government official? Why did she acquiesce

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to his decision to cut all her prefaces and commentaries from the *Biographies of Foreign Women*, a work that he could never have translated on his own? Did she take exception to her husband's comment, in the introduction to *Around the World in Eighty Days*, that she had long been a cultural chauvinist, who only under his tutelage came to recognize the value of "world histories and treatises" (p. 186)?

These questions are important not because a "real" Xue Shaohui waits submerged under the publications. We should assume nothing about interiority or a more authentic self obscured by the written record. They are important, rather, because Xue staked out such a clear position about the capabilities of women in all her published work, and it would be useful to know how she negotiated the changes happening all around her, including the ones she herself helped to set in motion, at the level of the body, the heart, and daily life.

The paradox of historical work, however, is that new silences become obvious even as the best work allows us to hear previously inaudible voices. In *Politics, Poetics, and Gender in Late Qing China*, Nanxiu Qian has given us an enormously rich portrayal of one woman thinking and writing in the company of family and friends. It is a measure of Xue's achievement, and of Qian's, that this account leaves us wanting more.

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Runaway Wives, Urban Crimes, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing, 1937–1949. By Zhao Ma. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015. Pp. xiv + 366. $49.95/£36.95.

In this interesting study, Zhao Ma examines the "life experiences of lower-class women and, in particular, their struggles and tactics of survival" (p. 318) during a turbulent time of war and foreign occupation. The author adopts Michel de Certeau's contention that quotidian activities such as "talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc." reveal "everyday tactics" people deploy to "constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into 'opportunities'" and "continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them" (p. 3). By focusing on Beijing's lower-class women's "everyday tactics," the author aims to

> explore . . . questions such as how changes in politics and society affected the meaning and function of the city for women during the war. How did these

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