

Overt & Covert Treasures: Essays on the Sources for Chinese Women's History.

Edited by Clara Wing-chung Ho. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2012. Pp. xii + 608. \$65.00.

In this substantial volume, an international group of scholars under the leadership of Clara Wing-chung Ho explores the rich sources for Chinese women's history from the earliest times to the early twentieth century. In eighteen chapters, an epilogue, and a bibliography of works on methodology, the book not only catalogues the extremely abundant and diverse materials that a would-be historian of Chinese women has at his or her disposal, it also provides many wonderful examples of how such materials can be used. The articles are arranged in roughly chronological order, with the volume's centre of gravity resting in late imperial China. But although about half of the chapters are devoted to sources from the fourteenth through nineteenth centuries, three investigate sources from the Warring States (475–221 B.C.E.) and Han (206 B.C.E.–C.E. 220) periods, two others describe texts from the early imperial era (late Han through early Song, roughly the first through tenth centuries C.E.), and two extend their analysis into the 1930s. The chapters survey a wide spectrum of historical and literary genres to demonstrate that, when approached with creativity and attention, even apparently irrelevant or recalcitrant sources can reveal intriguing and useful information about the lives of Chinese women in past times.

In the opening to the first chapter, editor Clara Ho characterizes the volume as a source guide, intended in part to demonstrate the coming-of-age of the field of Chinese women's history. Within this general rubric, however, the authors take varying approaches. Several authors, like Ho herself, survey a broad corpus of materials, pointing out in general terms where information on women can be found therein. This approach is taken by Yi Jo-lan, who outlines where sources for women appear in the Chinese standard histories, and by Harriet T. Zurndorfer, who investigates sources for women in Chinese encyclopaedias (*leishu* 類書). Other chapters focus more on the kinds of information that can be drawn from certain sources. The chapters by Lisa Raphals, Eva Kit Wah Man, Ping Yao, Ellen Widmer, Grace S. Fong, Weijing Lu, and Hon-ming Yip arguably fall into this category. Still other chapters discuss their sources in the context of a specific research question or analytical problem. Thus the chapters by Anne Behnke Kinney, Jen-der Lee, Wai-ye Li, Hu Ying, Joan Judge, and Wong Man Kong might be characterized as research articles with a strong historiographical component. Finally, Patricia Ebrey's discussion of how to use illustrations, and Louise Edwards's consideration of the role of fiction in historical writing, are largely methodological in orientation. I hasten to add that these categorizations overlap and are by no means absolute: virtually all of the

chapters offer research insights, historiographical information, and methodological models.

In addition to their textual expositions, several chapters also provide noteworthy tables and charts of source materials: Clara Ho's chapter contains a helpful chart of the categories and sub-categories of the *sibu* 四部 (pp. 3–12); Anne Behnke Kinney tabulates references to women of the Spring and Autumn state of Wei 衛 as found in the *Book of Odes* and its prefaces and commentaries (pp. 86–102); Yi Jo-lan includes a table designating where material on women can be found in the standard histories (pp. 132–33); Harriet Zurndorfer identifies sources on women in ten encyclopaedias from the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (pp. 297–300); and Grace Fong tabulates biographical material found in fifty-seven women's poetry collections digitalized in the McGill-Harvard-Yenching Library Ming Qing Women's Writings Database (pp. 387–404). Space does not permit a thorough consideration of all the riches that the chapters in this volume contain: accordingly, in what follows I briefly review the contents of each chapter, with the goal of alerting readers to chapters most relevant to their individual areas of research.

To open the volume, Clara Ho's essay, "An Investigation into the Sources for Women's History in the *Sibu*: In Lieu of an Introduction" (pp. 1–34), takes on no less a corpus than the "Four Categories" (*sibu*) of Chinese learning. Ho reviews the kinds of texts categorized under the traditional bibliographic rubrics: the Classics (*jingbu* 經部), the Histories (*shibu* 史部), the Philosophers (or, in Ho's apt translation, the Disciplines) (*zibu* 子部), and the Collections (*jibu* 集部). She points out where certain sub-categories are particularly rich in materials on women, taking note of important scholarship that has been done using particular types of material and introducing relevant indices and other valuable research aids. The wealth of intriguing materials that Ho highlights in this chapter seem certain to engender (pun intended!) dozens of fascinating dissertations.

In her chapter, Lisa Raphals considers "How the History of Women in Early China Intersects with the History of Science in Early China" (pp. 35–59). Raphals explores the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經, the *Shiji* 史記, and recently excavated texts from the Han and pre-Han periods, searching for information about women's involvement in medicine, on the one hand, and in "the so-called *shushu* 數術 culture of numbers, divination and longevity practices" (p. 35), on the other. Raphal's discussion directs the reader to considerable early data concerning women as both recipients and practitioners of the medical and mantic arts.

Anne Behnke Kinney's chapter, "The Mao Commentary to the *Book of Odes* as a Source for Women's History" (pp. 61–111), argues that the *Book of Odes* was a central text for women's education during the Han dynasty. After careful reflection on

the complicated historiographical issues that surround the *Odes* and its commentaries, Kinney proceeds to investigate the lessons Han women may have gleaned from it, focusing in particular on a set of poems and attendant commentary associated with the state of Wei. Kinney enhances her discussion of the poems and commentaries by juxtaposing them with related historical narratives from the *Zuozhuan*. Her fine-grained analysis not only suggests how these often-opaque poems may have been read by Han women, it reveals the powerful emotional and moral complexity they could express.

Eva Kit Wah Man's chapter, "Discourses on Female Bodily Aesthetics and Its Early Revelations in *The Book of Songs*" (pp. 113–30) likewise centres on the *Book of Odes* (though here called *The Book of Songs*). Relying on Arthur Waley's translation, Man focuses her investigation on the poems themselves, analysing what they tell us about ideals of female physical appearance (and, for comparison, male physical appearance). She catalogues a plethora of (sometimes contradictory) images found in the poems, and shows that many later clichés of female beauty and behaviour were foreshadowed in the *Songs*.

In "Social Status, Gender Division and Institutions: Sources Relating to Women in Chinese Standard Histories" (pp. 131–55), Yi Jo-lan traces the different ways early and later standard histories treat various types of palace women, on the one hand, and the category of exemplary women (*lienü* 列女), on the other. Yi usefully points out that information about women can be found in many areas of the histories not expressly devoted to the topic of women, such as the treatises on institutions. She reviews the limitations of source materials on women found in the histories, such as their biases toward people of high rank and political power, or toward certain regions of the country. Yi concludes her chapter by reminding the reader that the histories were shaped by the explicit intention of apportioning "praise and blame" and thus cannot be treated as simple reflections of the "truth."

Ping Yao's chapter, "Women in Portraits: An Overview of Epitaphs from Early and Medieval China" (pp. 157–83), opens with a brief but important discussion of the evolution of epitaph writing from the Han to the Tang. Yao then culls from her sources demographic information such as lifespan, age at marriage, and number of children. For the pre-Tang period the surviving texts are so few that this demographic information can be little more than suggestive, but the relatively large corpus of surviving inscriptions from the Tang permits greater confidence in the figures Yao provides. Those figures show interesting and fairly consistent discrepancies between age at death for men and women (men tend to live longer, as we might expect given the dangers of childbirth for women). In the second half of the chapter, Yao investigates how the contents and emphases of epitaphs changed over time,

suggesting that by the Tang they came to place greater emphasis on the multiple roles women played within the family. She also discusses epitaphs for concubines, noting that those from Tang make a clearer distinction between the status of the wife and the concubine, and are more likely to acknowledge a concubine's lowly birth. Yao concludes with valuable caveats about the limitations of the genre of epitaphs, especially that the information they convey could be altered to conform to the ideal conventions of both the genre and of the deceased.

Jen-der Lee's impressively researched chapter, entitled "*Ishinpo* and Its Excerpts from *Chanjing*: A Japanese Medical Text as a Source for Chinese Women's History" (pp. 185–215), examines a Japanese medical text compiled in 982, which drew on some two hundred earlier Chinese medical texts, most no longer extant. By comparing the Japanese text to surviving Chinese medical treatises, Lee argues that whereas the Chinese medical tradition focused on bodily difference and saw menstruation as causing many of women's health problems, the Japanese tradition was largely unconcerned with such theoretical discussions: the *Ishinpo* 醫心方 served instead as a compendium of prescriptions. Lee suggests that the Chinese theoretical approach helps explain the early establishment of an independent field of gynaecology in China.

Patricial Ebrey's "Illustrating Chinese Women's History" (pp. 217–59) considers the uses and abuses of illustration in studies of women's history. Ebrey critiques the somewhat cavalier way that illustrations have often been used in English-language works on Chinese women, suggesting that authors often do not give their readers sufficient information to understand the contexts or nuances of the illustrations. She then presents several examples of the radically differing ways that art historians have understood certain paintings, demonstrating the complexity of images that a single illustration can convey. Ebrey concedes that illustrations can provide valuable "incidental detail" to augment historical discussions, but her overall point—that authors should be more thoughtful in their use of illustrations—is well taken.

In "Gazetteers and the Talented Woman" (pp. 261–78), Ellen Widmer casts her survey of local gazetteers in very concrete and personal terms, sharing with the reader the triumphs and difficulties she encountered in using gazetteers to investigate the lives of six Qing dynasty women writers. Along the way, she provides a wealth of strategies to aid the researcher in using gazetteer sources (these guidelines are summarized in the closing sections of the chapter). Widmer observes, for example, that although women appear most prominent those sections of gazetteers devoted to exemplary women or catalogues of writings, valuable information about them can also sometimes be found appended to entries about their husbands or fathers. Widmer also suggests that, when researching women, county gazetteers tend to be more useful

than those encompassing wider geographical areas. This chapter will be especially useful to those who are interested in the specific Qing women Widmer studies (Wang Dunashu 王端淑, Gui Maoyi 歸懋儀, Wang Dun 汪端, Gu Taiqing 顧太清, Wang Qingdi 王慶棣, and Shan Shili 單士釐), but her frank discussion of dead ends and fortuitous discoveries also makes this chapter an excellent introduction to the joys and frustrations of research. With its emphasis on the value of perseverance (“More than once I concluded that there was nothing on my subject only to discover I was wrong” [p. 266]), this would be a wonderful chapter to assign to students about to begin their dissertation research.

Harriet T. Zurndorfer’s chapter, “Women in Chinese Encyclopedias” (pp. 279–305), can itself be called encyclopaedic. It opens with a fascinating history of the genre which also highlights some of its generic conventions, such as the hierarchical ordering of material. Zurndorfer then provides a detailed survey of the encyclopaedias contained in the *Siku quanshu* collectanea, including discussion of earlier secondary scholarship that has dealt with those encyclopaedias. She next narrows her focus to the ten (out of sixty-five) encyclopaedias that include substantial sections on women. Describing three texts from the Tang, three from the Song, and two each from the Ming and Qing periods, she compares the circumstances of their compilation and the changing attitudes toward women expressed in them. Zurndorfer concludes with a brief discussion of the *Trousseau History* (*Lianshi* 奩史), the “first major encyclopedic work to focus entirely on ‘female matters’” (p. 295), stressing that it has little to say about the “chastity cult” so prominent in this era. Zurndorfer concludes that, overall, these encyclopaedias show that the *Siku* editors did not uphold any one particular representation of women.

Louise Edwards’s chapter explores the relationship between “Gendered Fictions and Chinese Women’s History” (pp. 307–35). She points out that, although in the Chinese context both fiction and history were meant to be didactic, fiction could be ironic and multi-vocal, and could encompass topics that were considered beneath the purview of the historian. Noting that few fiction sources by women survive, she suggests (following Ellen Widmer) that the genre of *tanci* 彈詞 provides a potentially fruitful avenue for exploring a pre-twentieth-century female narrative voice, and she highlights the potential value of male-authored fiction as a source for incidental information about women’s lives. Edwards concludes by proposing that fiction, and pornography in particular, can provide rare information about sexual ideology and about the complex relationship between female sexuality, reproduction, and virtue.

In “Romantic Recollections of Women as Sources of Women’s History” (pp. 337–67), Wai-yee Li analyses men’s images of women in a set of romantic memoirs composed between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Li stresses

that all of her sources were marked by nostalgia, fragmentation, and a romantic-aesthetic sensibility. All depict beauties of refined taste and sublime talent who reside in exquisitely-appointed and secluded rooms. Li suggests that the ephemeral glamour evoked in these memoirs is “all the more treasured and celebrated precisely because it is recognized as a precariously sustained, carefully wrought, and passionately defended illusion” (p. 341), in which romance, sex, and morality are perfectly compatible, and in which women’s literary talent is valorised and (for the most part) unproblematic. Although Li ultimately concludes that these stories are about “romantic and aesthetic ideals about women” (p. 361), and don’t tell us much about the lives of actual women, her evocative and insightful analysis of these memoirs is a pure delight to read.

Grace Fong’s chapter, entitled “Auto/biographical Subjects: Ming-Qing Women’s Poetry Collections as Sources for Women’s Life Histories” (pp. 369–410), surveys a group of women’s literary collections from the McGill-Harvard-Yenching Library *Ming Qing Women’s Writings* Digitization Project, which encompasses some ninety collections by women authors. Fong is interested particularly in the biographical material contained in what she calls the “paratext” sections of these literary collections (prefaces, postfaces, appended biographies, commentaries, and so forth). She systematically analyses each paratext category, explaining its literary and social functions, discussing the forms of texts commonly found therein, and evaluating the usefulness (or not) of those texts to understanding the lives of the collections’ authors. Fong concludes her extremely useful survey by emphasizing that the legacy of Ming and Qing writing women was central to the rapid development of women’s education in the early twentieth century.

Weijing Lu’s contribution, “Personal Writings on Female Relatives in the Qing Collected Works” (pp. 411–34), argues that men’s writings about their female relatives comprise an important and still underused source for the history of Chinese women. Lu opens with a brief survey of the history of “collected works” as a genre. She delineates the different kinds of texts typically found in collected works, paying special attention to the categories of texts men tended to use when they wrote about women. The bulk of Lu’s chapter then presents an assortment of lively and effective examples, drawn from Qing collected works, of men’s writing about their mothers, their wives, their daughters, and occasional other female relatives. In each case, Lu suggests to the reader the kinds of historical conclusions that we might draw from the cited passages, foregrounding the insights they provide into emotional life, family dynamics, and women’s power within families. Lu acknowledges that men’s accounts of their family members must be “taken with a grain of salt” (p. 430), but she shows that such accounts can add depth and texture to our understanding of women’s lives.

At the outset of her innovative chapter “Women’s Characters: Calligraphy as a Source for Women’s History” (pp. 435–60), Hu Ying raises three questions: “Is there gender in calligraphy?” “What can calligraphy tell us about the history of Chinese women that . . . sources such as poetry and biography cannot?” And, “Is there a significant difference in the way calligraphy was practiced by women at the end of the imperial era from the way it was practiced in the two millennia prior?” (p. 436). She answers the first question with a succinct gendered history of calligraphy, in which she points out both the importance of women as practitioners of calligraphy and the systematic biases to which they were subjected. The remaining two questions are answered by means of a brilliant investigation of the variant, though always gendered, roles that calligraphy played in the lives and historical legacies of three early twentieth-century women: the revolutionary martyr Qiu Jin 秋瑾; the writer and calligrapher Wu Zhiying 吳芝瑛; and the courtesan/concubine Sai Jinhua 賽金花. Hu shows that calligraphy “meant” very different things in these women’s lives, though she argues that in all cases “their handwriting . . . endowed the[ir] respective causes with authenticity” (p. 455). Hu Ying concludes that her study “tell[s] us more about how historians (professional or amateur) write history . . . than how individuals experience history” (ibid.), but her chapter provides an exemplary model of how calligraphic sources can be deployed in service of historical inquiry.

Joan Judge’s chapter, “A Kaleidoscope of Knowledge about Women: The Chinese Periodical Press, 1872–1918” (pp. 461–85) argues for the importance of the late nineteenth/early twentieth-century periodical press as a source for women’s history. She makes her case by investigating the fraught topic of female chastity. Judge demonstrates that periodicals from this period exhibited a multiplicity of views on female chastity: some male authors continued to celebrate chaste women, while others borrowed rhetoric from men of earlier dynasties to criticize the chastity cult. More importantly, as women began to air their views in the public press, they too expressed a diversity of opinion: even as some wanted to see the virtue of chastity adapted to the new nationalist context, others passionately argued that the chastity cult was inimical to modern womanhood. Observing that the later (and largely male) May Fourth critique of the chastity cult “occluded this extensive earlier critique” (p. 478), Judge makes a persuasive case that the turn-of-the-century periodical press can help us recoup a more complete and nuanced picture of women’s history at the turn of the twentieth century.

The same periodical press is also the subject of Hon-ming Yip’s “Between Drawing and Writing: Prostitutes in the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*” (pp. 487–542). Yip catalogues some forty-two illustrations of courtesans and prostitutes drawn from a late nineteenth-century illustrated news magazine, the *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報, providing a brief history of the periodical and exploring what can be known of the

illustrators. She examines some of the common themes in the pictures, observing that the illustrations of courtesans were often positive (for example, showing them giving charity), while those of streetwalkers were overwhelmingly negative (p. 492). She also notes the tension between the illustrations, which were often somewhat shocking, even erotic, and the captions, which tended to moralize. Yip concludes that these sources amply demonstrate the “contradictions and ambiguities” (p. 497) experienced in this period of China; the happy inclusion of all forty-two illustrations allows the reader to see these ambiguities herself.

The final chapter of the volume, Wong Man Kong’s “The Stories of Urban Christian Women in Nineteenth-century South China: With Special Reference to Missionary-related Sources” (pp. 543–70), traces the biographies of two Chinese Christian women who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The stories of the women themselves (especially that of Margaret Wong Tuan-keng 黃端瓊), contain many fascinating elements, and the material Wong presents makes it very clear that these women’s English language skills and connections with foreigners allowed them substantially more status and freedom of action (at least within foreign-related circles) than most of their peers. Wong concedes that many details of her subjects’ lives remain “somewhat hazy” (p. 563), but her account does show that sources from missionary archives can be used to augment our understanding of the complex ways Christianity affected some Chinese women’s lives in this period.

The book closes with brief comments (pp. 571–78) from Dorothy Ko, Angela Ki Che Leung, Jo-shui Chen, and Robin D. S. Yates, cataloguing some of the accomplishments of the volume and suggesting new avenues for investigation. The volume’s final pages are devoted to “A Selected Bibliography of Useful Works on the Methodologies of Chinese Women’s History,” compiled by Kar-kee Lo 盧嘉琪 and Hoi-ling Lui 呂凱鈴. Though brief, the bibliography provides a convenient reference to methodological writings in both Chinese and English.

Taken together, the chapters and other materials in this volume represent a valuable contribution to the field of Chinese women’s studies, especially for the imperial era. The editor and the Chinese University Press are to be commended for seeing it into print.

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