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Wouldn’t it be marvellous to have a handbook suggesting sources for women’s history in imperial China with advice on how to use them? Clara Ho (Hong Kong Baptist University) and the sponsors of the conference (Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, Mr Arthur Lau and Hong Kong Baptist University) believe this would be one way of encouraging more research in Chinese women’s history. From the conference’s very inception, the vision for just such a volume was there. Everything was based on the premise that unlike Western scholars searching for the needle in the haystack, researchers on Chinese women’s history have an easier task. Chinese women do not have to be added back into the historical record as Susan Mann (University of California, Davis) remarked in closing the event. They are already there, provided you know where to look. She argued that a re-reading of Chinese sources was all that was necessary to produce new scholarship. Leading scholars working with a variety of existing materials had been asked to present papers introducing their sources, making them more accessible to researchers on women and also analysing their strengths and weaknesses. Such a broad remit produced a range of responses using sources from early China to the Republican era. In addition to re-reading well-known texts, previously marginalized ones were put under the microscope. A third approach was to concentrate on paths less well trodden in Chinese gender studies – non-textual sources. Given the huge range of topics covered, this review will not attempt to assess the interpretations given but concentrate on the new insights and research tips offered on possible avenues of research for scholars of women’s history.

Despite the conference’s desire to break new ground, only Patricia Ebrey and Dorothy Ko stepped away from the textual archive, looking at art and material culture respectively. In what she described as an experiment, Dorothy Ko (Barnard College, Columbia University) delved into the world of female artisans with her paper “Material Culture and Women’s History”. Moving away from shoes and dress, she turned her attention to inkstone carving. Her study was of Gu Erniang (顧二娘, ca. 1662 – 1724; fl 1700 - 1724), a female craftsman from Suzhou, some of whose work has survived. Although Gu was accepted as a skilled worker in this male domain, her work was feminized by her male patrons and her persona eroticised in the stories and legends that developed around her. Unfortunately, Gu’s rise to fame was made possible by special circumstances (her
father-in-law died as did her husband to whom the skills had been passed on, so Gu Erniang inherited the mantle) and she was the exception in this male-dominated field. Indeed, Ko concludes, little is known about female artisans who did achieve a certain status in their field of work since they did not threaten the male patriarchal order. Therefore, while Ko’s study is an admirable start, it does not shed so much light on the broader world of female artisans. Patricia Ebrey’s (University of Washington, Seattle) paper entitled “Illustrating Chinese Women’s History” also revealed the frustrations of working with non-textual sources. While championing the value of pictures as a source of historical evidence about women, their limitations were also very evident. Ebrey’s discussion about the disagreement among art historians over the meanings of paintings (such as Ladies with Flowers in their Hair, which is probably from the tenth century) and the differing interpretations of texts accompanying the pictures, show how dangerous it can be to use pictures as the sole basis for a particular theory.

Studies based on re-reading well-known texts, face a different challenge – the difficulty of tracking down women. In the case of the standard histories, the only way is a time-consuming reading of their contents. But Yi Jo-lan’s (Cambridge University/National Taiwan University) “Social Hierarchy, Gender Division and Institutions: Source relating to Women in the Standard Histories” demonstrated how much more than pure political history can be gleaned. Far from being restricted to the well-explored lienü zhuan (列女傳) sections, women appear in others previously under-appreciated by gender researchers such as the Treatises (zhì 職官志). These offer a less consciously constructed view of gender, such as the details of harem organization contained in seemingly unpromising Treatise of Official Post (zhiguan zhì 職官志) sections and information on female crime in the Treatise on Law and Punishment (xingfa zhì 刑罰志). Yi warned against several pitfalls including using statistical approaches to compare types of women in the lienü zhuan across various dynasties, reminding historians of the degree of summarization in the standard histories and the way they were compiled. Harriet Zurndorfer pointed out similar dangers and the need to be aware of the sources for encyclopaedias in her paper “Women in Chinese Encyclopedia”.

An example of a previously marginalized text studied was presented by Lisa Raphals (University of California, Riverside) in “How the History of Women in Early China Intersects with the History of Science in Early China.” Illustrating how the Joseph Needham school of science history had rendered the female contribution invisible by relegating it to the league of pseudo science, she looked at shushu (數術), the Numbers and Divination section in the Hanshu yiwenzhi (漢書藝文志). Shushu, which covered both divination and physiognomy, was practised by a considerable number of women. In early China, women appear to have had a greater freedom than in later periods to consult not just female healers (wu 巫) but also female tortoise, yarrow and dream diviners.

Most of the marginal texts used were literary ones. Family writing was revealed as a much-underused resource by Weijing Lu (University of California, San Diego on wenji 文集), Ping Yao (California State University, Los Angeles on epitaphs), Grace Fong (McGill University on jiake 家刻) and Timothy Wong (Hong Kong Baptist University on oral history eventually written down by families). Fiction was presented as a major avenue for exploration and a means of
Escaping from the scholarly concentration on talented women. Previously considered too low-brow, Wai-yee Li’s (Harvard University) “Romantic Recollections of Women as Sources of Women’s History” looked at such writings by men including ones on the “debased” (jian 賤) – the courtesans. While Li showed these could contain historical nuggets, they remain problematic because of the silence of the objects, the women themselves. Given their romanticized nature, she stressed they could not be treated unquestioningly as descriptions of historical reality but would be better used for a history of the mentalities of the day. In “Gendered History and Women’s Fiction” Louise Edwards (University of Technology, Sydney) advocated the use of erotic and pornographic literature, proposing its value in studying the economy of sexual morality. Scholars, she argued, needed to be looking at the links between virtue and sexuality, not just virtue and talent.

One of the major themes of the conference was how to make the best use of literature in studying women’s history. Much reference was made in discussion times to the difficulties for scholars in locating Chinese women’s writings and indeed of determining the gender of authors. This has to some extent prevented scholars of women’s history from exploiting the greater access to texts online. It was agreed that new techniques are needed to make effective use of databases for tracing women. As Louise Edwards pointed out, the gendering problem can be circumnavigated by simply writing about representations of women in the texts where the gender is unclear. However this is limiting to scholars and Ellen Widmer’s (Wesleyan University) “Gazetteers and the Talented Woman” showed very practically how she had uncovered the work of women writers using smaller gazetteers. In general, scholars’ most favoured use of literary sources was in conjunction with historical ones, something that Anne Behnke Kinney (University of Virginia) did in “The Book of Odes as Source of Women’s History”. She studied it together with the Zuo zhuan (左傳) to reveal details of marriage practices. Overall, participants agreed that information incidental to the point of the text provides the most solid material for researchers. It was also felt that a closer study of the interplay of language and silence could be a fruitful avenue of exploration.

Previously overlooked sources already in the public domain were also suggested as potentially rich seams of information on women’s history. Although epitaphs and tombstones are now being worked on, Robin Yates (McGill University) lamented the almost total ignoring of temple inscriptions and other more religious writings such as biographies of goddesses and female masters. Far from scrapping the bottom of the barrel, such texts could provide a wealth of information if approached creatively.

Did the conference meet its own aim of providing the nucleus of such a handbook? One of the main problems was the tension in the organizers’ brief between the practical and the interpretive. Some of the papers concentrated on the latter, making key contributions in presenting new findings on women. Joan Judge (York University), for example, uncovered the female contribution in the turn of the twentieth century press to the debate on the female chastity cult. Her paper “A Kaleidoscope of Knowledge about Women: The Chinese Periodical Press, 1872-1918” showed that far from being dead, the idea of chaste martyrs was very much alive but hotly contested – even among women. At the other end of the moral discourse in such publications, Yip Hon Ming (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) revealed the focus on prostitutes in China’s first popular
illustrated news magazine in “Prostitutes in the Dianshizhai Pictorial (點石齋畫報)”. Several other scholars have demonstrated the late Qing press’s use of these women as convenient objects for the public to pry into the previous private lives of women. Their treatment in the Dianshizhai reveals a much more multi-layered and multi-faceted approach than has previously been described. Prostitutes were shown as having the power to violate traditional moral codes and norms of space, challenging both class and gender structure in shocking ways such as through transvestisms. These papers contrasted starkly with the much more practical approach taken by scholars such as Ellen Widmer. When heard together the presentations complemented each other but were clearly addressed to audiences with different levels of knowledge. Nevertheless, these papers represent an important first step in the compilation of a pioneering and much needed handbook, which could serve as a standard reference work for students of gender studies.

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