Abstract

The Qing women I discuss in this book refer to the upper-class women from the gentry families, especially those who had received a fine education. As family conditions could determine women’s ability in reading and writing, chapter one will investigate the kind of education that women received and how male scholars perceived these women then. Even though gentry women were expected to read and write, the purpose of writing for women (regardless the quality of it) was always subjected to scrutiny and evaluation. The Qing gentry women might be honoured for their exceptional talent or they might be the center of controversy as were the women poets in Yuan Mei’s entourage of female followers. We shall see how these women challenged the fundamental conventions of Chinese high culture during the seventeenth century in the second chapter.

Through reading and writing, elite women developed new spheres of influence, expanding the domain of kinship and friendship beyond domestic space, mastering the tools of learning that had been the domain of men, and articulating notions of talent and beauty in a dialogue with husbands, lovers, and fathers, both male and female. In the last chapter, we shall see how educated women from the gentry families poured their loneliness, isolation and emotional privation into poetry and lyrics, revealing to us a lost world.