

## **Artistic Awakening and Identity Discovery: Unique Culture of Chinese Female Poets in the 17th-19th Centuries**

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**Abstract:** While ancient China has long adhered to the traditional division of labor with men responsible for external affairs and women for domestic duties, the fact that women's production of "nü hong" (women's handicrafts) also constituted a vital component of the family economy has been consistently overlooked by a male-dominated society. From the 17th to the 19th century, as large-scale "guixiu" literature (literature produced by educated women) gained prominence, the voices of women gradually gained strength. In the tumultuous historical context of the time, Ming and Qing dynasty female poets were compelled to step out of their homes in search of means of livelihood. By studying their paths to survival, this research seeks to achieve several objectives: firstly, it presents a perspective distinct from the traditional image of female poets characterized by superficiality and fragility; secondly, to some extent, it illustrates the possibility of women leading independent lives during the Ming and Qing dynasties; thirdly, it unveils their self-awareness of identity in the social context of necessity for social interaction to secure their livelihoods. Consequently, this research strives to depict the image of Ming and Qing dynasty female poets as embodying "independent survival and self-awareness," which played a significant role in fostering the budding development of self-awareness among Chinese women.

**Keywords:** Ming and Qing Dynasties, Ming and Qing Female Poets, Livelihood, Female Tutors, Women's Handicrafts, Female Consciousness.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Under the traditional Chinese ideology of "men as providers, women as homemakers," ancient Chinese women found it challenging to break free from their secluded lives and seek independent means of livelihood. However, when confronted with the turmoil of upheaval, female poets faced a crisis in managing family changes and coping with life's hardships. This disrupted the traditional order of domestic roles. One of the crucial questions that female poets began to ponder was how to sustain their livelihoods. Admittedly, some of these female poets, despite experiencing turmoil alongside their fathers or husbands, did not face concerns about their livelihoods due to factors such as official positions, early retirement, or their absence from the center of war. They still maintained a decent quality of life. However, women trapped in the midst of the battleground were not as fortunate, often enduring scarcity of clothing and food. Some

female poets also found themselves in such dire circumstances. Apart from relying on traditional handicrafts like women's embroidery, or the support of family and friends to get by, these female poets utilized their talents to earn a living. Their ability to rely on their skills for survival was intricately connected with various aspects of society and culture. Exploring the various ways in which women survived during times of turmoil helps us understand the phenomenon of the relatively expanded social attributes of learning and social interaction among Ming and Qing dynasty women. In a certain sense, it reflects the early stages of the budding self-awareness among women.

## 2. WOMEN'S EMBROIDERY (女红)

The gender-specific nature of women's embroidery, known as "女红" (nǚ hong), has existed since ancient times in the context of the traditional Chinese ideology of "men as providers, women as homemakers." The division of labor between men and women has historically been summarized as "男耕女织," meaning men plow and women weave. Women's embroidery was one of the most significant activities within the domestic sphere, and it was also one of the "Four Virtues" advocated by Ban Zhao, a prominent female scholar in ancient China. Ban Zhao outlined these virtues as follows: "A woman has four virtues: womanly virtue, womanly speech, womanly appearance, and womanly work... Womanly work does not require extraordinary skill... Focusing on spinning and weaving, refraining from frivolous jests, keeping food and drink clean, and offering them to guests—this is what we call womanly work" (Ban, 2012). It can be said that "embroidery, women's handicraft, is indeed a proper duty for women.", Women's embroidery was considered a means to cultivate women's patience and to foster their virtuous and pure demeanor. Therefore, it became one of the crucial components for measuring a woman's virtue. For the talented women of the Ming and Qing dynasties who resided in the inner chambers, they did not need to rely on embroidery for economic sustenance. However, it served as a way for them to demonstrate their virtuous and refined qualities, as well as to leave an opportunity for others to praise them. This is often mentioned in the poems of female poets from the inner chambers, such as the following example by Xi Peilan: "With fragrant threads, my arm gently weaves;

Diligently selecting various floral patterns. Most of my youthful beauty has withered away, But I embroider lotus flowers to represent virtuous women" [Xi Peilan, an excerpt from her poem]. This poem explicitly illustrates the intention behind this identity.

According to Fang Xiu Jie's research in "The Hands of Women: The Embroidery Knowledge of Chinese Women in the Late Qing Dynasty and Early Republic of China," among women who could write poetry, the titles of their poetry collections often started with the character "绣" (xiu), indicating the central importance of embroidery as a specific female practice in their minds. In the bibliography compiled by Hu Wenkai, there were a total of 191 collections that started with "绣," surpassing any other starting character. Among these collection titles, "绣余" (xiu yu) was frequently used as the starting phrase. For example, titles like Feng Sihui's "绣余吟" (Embroidery Remnants Poem), Wu Xiuzhu's "绛珠阁绣余遗草" (Crimson Pearl Pavilion: Embroidery Remnants and Residual Grass), Gui Maoyi's "绣余小草" (Embroidery Remnants: Little Grass), and "绣余续草" (Embroidery Remnants: Continued Grass) all aimed to prove that these poems were composed after completing their primary embroidery tasks, underscoring the importance of embroidery within the framework of virtuous conduct.

From this perspective, it becomes evident that for women, the significance of women's embroidery far exceeded their other activities, including literary endeavors—at least, this is the attitude they conveyed.

Women's embroidery not only held moral significance but was also a vital part of family income. The basic necessities of life, known as "衣食住行" (clothing, food, shelter, and transportation), for ordinary families in ancient times were primarily provided by the female members of the household through sericulture, silk spinning, weaving, sewing, and even embroidery. Those with surplus often exchanged well-spun fabrics and well-made clothes for money or food. As Man Su'en points out, "In the prosperous Qing era, a woman's worth—her value to her family and to the state treasury, as well as her value as a human being—was measured by her productive labor and her skills in shuttle weaving and needlework" (Man, 2022).

Indeed, against the backdrop of the Ming and Qing commodity

economy, women of all classes were required to possess proficient skills in women's embroidery. For common women, textile work, including spinning and embroidery, became a means of livelihood and, at times, even the economic backbone of the entire family. In Li Boreng's research, he roughly estimated that rural women earned approximately ten taels of silver per year through textile work, equivalent to 4.4 shi of rice (Li, 2008).

Qing dynasty female poet Wang Yiqiu, for example, had to "manage household affairs and raise five children" due to her husband's five-year absence, and she did so by "supplying their needs with her needlework" (Yuan, 2010). Similarly, Huang Shi, the wife of Anlin Jin, resorted to "exchanging her embroidery for rice to support her husband's studies" (Liang, 2010), among others.

Furthermore, with the gradual emergence of handicraft capitalism, a plethora of handicraft workshops in the Jiangnan region provided women with employment opportunities. They leveraged their skills in making mats, spinning cotton, raising silkworms, and reeling silk, among other tasks, to earn income. Some female weavers and embroiderers gained fame for their exceptional skills, such as Gu Xiu and Ding Niang Xiu, among others.

In times of turmoil, women's embroidery naturally became one of the crucial means for female poets to sustain their livelihoods. For instance, female poet Ding Pei resorted to embroidery as a means of supporting her three daughters after her husband's death. Similarly, female poet Cao Xuefen:

Cao Xuefen, with the courtesy name Meiqing, was a native of Dantu. At the age of twenty-eight, she became a widow, and her family estate was destroyed by fire. Her livelihood became increasingly difficult, and she faced the hardships of her time. She had to move from place to place, maintaining her integrity while dealing with these challenges. She found solace in her needlework, using it to provide for her orphaned children (Y. Wang).

As evident from their journeys of relocation and displacement, needlework was a crucial means for these women to sustain their livelihoods. References to needlework can also be found in the writings of female poets. For instance, poet Jin Lanzhen mentioned in the preface to her poems that she "spun and wove with her needlework to aid her family's enjoyment" (Jin). Poet Lu Mei from Haining described in her poem that her "needlework was insufficient to make a living, and she had to take on additional jobs to survive" (Records). This indicates that even embroidery alone was not enough to sustain their livelihoods, and they had to take on additional work.

It is worth mentioning that in the upper echelons of society, women were not satisfied with simple fabric patterns. The embroidery requirements for clothing were complex and extensive. Therefore, in addition to their own embroidery work, they relied on female servants within their households or purchased embroidered items from outside. The Zhang family of Changzhou, known for its talented women, also relied on their embroidery work to make a living during times of turmoil. Some female poets engaged in handcrafts to support themselves, like Zuo Xijia, who mentioned her experience of making and selling woven grass flowers:

"Time passes hastily, the world is colorful, where should my worries find expression? A few beams and tiles, heavy frost, and lessons all night as the lamp just ignites. The loom makes a grinding sound, only to win a pair of teardrops. Who pities me, making a living is not easy, cutting ribbons and fading the long night. Forget about elegant verses in the cold chamber, the natural talents and skills are hard to distinguish. Leaves cluster like flowers, the sandalwood fragrance is bitter, and it turns gently, emitting the fine scent of orchids and musk. Testing with the knife, it's not bad, borrowing a light breeze from the east. When sold, in the deep alley tomorrow morning, it will raise the price of flowers in Luoyang" (Zuo).

In summary, the embroidery skills of female poets during times of turmoil served dual purposes. They not only provided for their own and their families' daily needs but also generated a certain level of economic income. Some scholars argue that this demonstrates a small manifestation of women's self-awareness – the ability of women to support themselves and their families, their capacity for self-sufficiency, and even how their economic contributions elevated their social status [For related research, see Xu Ning, "Beyond the Boudoir: The Livelihood Strategies of Traditional Women in the Qing Dynasty," "Journal of Southeast University," 2016, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 141-148]. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, women's weaving work has always been a vital aspect of maintaining traditional agricultural society's households. Throughout history, this skill has been regarded as an integral part of the family's economic resources. Women used it to make a living during challenging times, contributing to household expenses. More importantly, it was an expression of traditional morality and virtuous behavior – a way of demonstrating their ability to manage a household effectively and uphold moral standards. The writings of female poets reflected not only the challenges they faced in their lives but also their adherence to these traditional values. Their use of these acquired skills to support their families became an event encompassed within the realm of traditional female household behavior.

### 3. PAWNSHOPS AND MUTUAL ASSISTANCE

During times of adversity, women faced the most dire and negative circumstances when they had nowhere to turn after the deaths of family members. The most desperate and pitiable situation for women was begging for survival. For instance, Zhao Xue'e, a female scholar from central Zhejiang, faced the turmoil of war and was forced to become a concubine in the Chen family. When the Chu River experienced a major flood and their boat capsized in the Xiang River while fleeing, her brother and she survived by clutching a broken oar, but the Chen family's matriarch drowned. Zhao Xue'e mourned by the river for five days, and when her body emerged, she begged passing travelers for the means to bury her (Shaoxishi).

When women faced the deaths of family members and had nowhere to live, the most dismal option was begging for survival. In the case of Zhao Xue'e, as mentioned above, she resorted to begging for food when her life was in dire straits. In similar circumstances, female poets would pawn their belongings to make ends meet. For example, Wu County poet Lu Feng wrote that during times of turmoil, she "pawned her wedding clothes to provide offerings in the ancestral hall," (Ding & Ding). She pawned her wedding clothes to get by, indicating the severity of her circumstances. Similarly, Chen Yunlian wrote in "Feelings About the Fire at the Miao Family's Residence Next Door" that she had "pawned her wedding clothes to take along," (Shi, 2011). In the case of Huang Zongxi's father, who was wrongfully imprisoned, his wife Ye Baolin "pawned clothes and jewelry to assist with funeral expenses" [Ibid]. In the late Ming Dynasty, female poet Ye Shuzhen "moved from place to place near the lakeside, pawned clothes for food, and earned a meager living. Her old illness worsened," [Ibid, p. 476-477]. Female poet Kuleyashi Lingwen also wrote a poem titled "Feeling about Pawning Clothes," which reflects the practice:

*The quality of spring garments has become thin,  
I have truly tasted the hardships of the times.  
The new elm leaves create dense shadows on the eaves,  
While I just spent countless coins on clothes.*

*I have pawned both new and old fur clothes,  
I sing short verses to dispel deep sorrow.  
In books, there are thousands of measures of grain,  
I only need to seek with diligence after the burial. (Lingwen)*

Looking at the items that were pawned, most of them were their own clothing and accessories. On the one hand, when women pawned their

personal belongings, it is likely that the entire family was impoverished to the extreme, making this portrayal even more poignant. On the other hand, in times of turmoil, women had a secondary role in family responsibilities, such as sacrificing themselves for the ideals of parents and husbands. For instance, during their escape, women could abandon anything, "except the poems of Xu Wenumu [Xu Wenmu Gong], the images passed down from previous generations, and other gifts from the pure ancestral temple." [Ibid, p. 456]. Women and their possessions were all appendages to the family, and during times of turmoil, this disposability became increasingly apparent.

Moreover, during times of hardship, female poets sometimes received assistance from friends and relatives. For example, female poet Shen Shanbao once composed a poem titled "Jiangxi Yao Shutang, Sending Off My Father with Treasures," in which she expressed her gratitude when her father's remains were returned to her. Another example is the poet Hu Xiao, who recalled that when the city was captured during the Gengshen incident, she fled with her four-year-old son to the home of relatives, where she was rescued from danger. Similarly, the poet Hang Wenru received gifts of rice, firewood, salt, paper, ink, brushes, and inkstones from her friends and expressed her gratitude in her poetry. The poet Hu Xiao also took refuge with relatives during the Gengshen incident.

As an example, let's take a closer look at the poem "I Seek Wild Herbs to Cook for Survival in Times of Hardship, My Friend Yang Sent Me Provisions" by the female poet Zheng Lansun of Qiantang:

*Ashamed to say, I've learned the art of survival to the north,  
Facing death with a resolute spirit doesn't surprise me.  
Early learning in poetry and books teaches great virtue,  
I pledge to protect my pure reputation like white jade.  
I dare to emulate the determination of a loyal minister,  
Chewing grass while still harboring deep loyalty.  
In my misfortune, a friend from the women's chamber  
Wrapped provisions and offered them with sincere care.*

*(Note: Madam Yang had prepared and stored a hundred stone of rice underground before the bandits arrived.)*

[From Zheng Lansun, "I Seek Wild Herbs to Cook for Survival in Times of Hardship, My Friend Yang Sent Me Provisions," in "Poetry Collection of the Lianyin Room," in Hu Xiaoming and Peng Guozhong (Editors), "Collected Works of Southern Women Writers," Vol. 3 (Hefei: Huangshan Press, 2012), p. 1049.]

The poem title reveals two key pieces of information: first, she suffered from war and was impoverished, even resorting to eating wild plants to

survive; second, her friend Madam Yang generously sent her provisions during her time of need.

Looking at the poem itself, Zheng Lansun remained resolute even in dire circumstances. She expressed no complaints, hardships, struggles, sorrows, or other emotions despite facing extreme difficulties to the point of surviving on wild plants. Instead, she calmly conveyed her determination to maintain her pure reputation and unyielding spirit, even in old age. The first six lines show her steadfast and righteous character, even when reduced to eating wild plants. Her gratitude for the kindness of her friend is expressed only in the last two lines.

In her self-introduction in "Poetry Collection of the Lianyin Room," Zheng Lansun clearly described her experience during the chaos of war, stating that she fled in haste from the turmoil. In her introduction, she expressed more intense emotions than in this poem, mentioning the painful loss of her manuscripts during her escape and the lack of family and friends during her refuge. Her poems "Looking in the Mirror and Lamenting," "Life Like a Dead Tree," "Lanzeng," and others vividly conveyed the emotions of women such as sorrow, distress, lamentation, and weeping. In contrast to this poem, her appreciation of her friends' support is less emotionally charged.

Considering the implications of this poem as a gesture of thanks, it is likely that Madam Yang was a friend but not an intimate one. This poem represents a form of public display in the social interactions of these noblewomen, and I do not intend to make any bold conclusions. Instead, I aim to explore the social interactions of female poets during times of hardship. In this poem, Zheng Lansun appears perfect, with no hint of relaxation or complacency. She constantly emphasizes her purity and loyalty, embodying the ideal image of a "virtuous and talented woman" in the eyes of society. By composing this poem in response to Madam Yang's generosity, is she conveying the message to the world that "women's daily exchanges serve to encourage each other's virtue"? To fully understand this, we must delve into the social interactions of female poets in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Due to various reasons such as the prosperity of the economy in the Jiangnan region, the development of publishing, and the relaxation of literary consciousness, the flourishing of poetry by talented women in the Qing Dynasty is an undeniable fact. Under the combined influence of various social factors, these gifted women no longer contented themselves with personal studies within the confines of their boudoirs. They expanded their cultural activities to establish connections, friendships, and a circle of

female poets. They also assumed various roles in society, including painters, poets, calligraphers, and editors.

Initially, the interactions among these female poets often revolved around family gatherings, banquets, and collaborative poetic activities. Well-known examples include Shen Yixiu, the wife of Ye Shaoyuan in Wujian, Jiangsu, and her daughters Ye Wanwan, Ye Xiaowan, Ye Xiaoluan, and Ye Xiaofan. Similarly, in Shanyin, Zhejiang, there was Shang Jinglan, the wife of Qi Biao Jia, and her daughters Qi Deyuan, Qi Deqiong, and Qi Deci. The interactions within families and among friends added an element of delight to the lives of these women. Their poetry extended beyond traditional themes of feminine emotions, embracing topics such as choosing poetic themes, adhering to rhyme schemes, appreciating scenic landscapes, and documenting gatherings.

As their friendships and interactions expanded, these women ventured out of their homes to socialize with people beyond their immediate families. They interacted with other female poets, male literati, monks, and even courtesans, breaking geographical, gender, and social boundaries. These interactions were not confined to women's self-indulgence; instead, they involved the active participation of male literati or artists, and sometimes even the courtesan community. While these interactions undoubtedly broadened their literary horizons and enriched their creativity, it's worth noting that they still conformed to societal norms and moral values. In their self-expressions, phrases like "for self-amusement" often appeared in their poetry as a way of signaling their respect for male literary circles.

Furthermore, the progression and flourishing of female interactions were often facilitated by male figures who recognized the talents of these women and felt a sense of achievement in supporting the "weaker sex." However, these interactions rarely crossed the boundaries of gender, as both men and women were hesitant to initiate such cross-gender relationships.

The expansion of their social networks allowed for various modes of interaction beyond just companionship within the confines of their boudoirs. These included inviting each other for scenic outings, exchanging paintings, composing and exchanging poems, and sending poetic gifts. While these interactions introduced an element of public exposure and dissemination to their literary endeavors, their creative works still adhered to the notion of "upholding one's identity." In their writings, they strived to maintain a balance between showcasing their talents and adhering to societal expectations of female morality.

Returning to Zheng Lansun's poem, her composed and composed demeanor in this expression of gratitude can be better understood in this context.

#### 4. SELLING BOOKS AND ART

During peaceful times, the women poets in the inner chambers of households were expected to learn feminine virtues and acquire skills in "women's work." However, parents in scholarly families also paid attention to their daughters' literary cultivation. They would instruct them in classic literature, encourage them to learn painting, calligraphy, and poetry, among other pursuits. This undoubtedly played a significant role in the prosperity of women's literary creation in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Many female poets of these periods were nurtured in this way, and their prefaces often mention what they learned during their childhood. For instance, Wang Zhenyi stated, "In my youth, I studied classics and was instructed in recitation, reading, and the composition of ancient poems in addition to my studies in women's work." Similarly, Xu Zhaohua said, "In my youth, I excelled in painting, calligraphy, and poetry."

Female poets like Zhang Yuzhen were known for their intelligence from a young age, excelling in reading, playing musical instruments, painting, and especially poetry. Another example is Ge Yi from Haining, who began her studies at the age of eight, learning "Female Learning" and "Treasure Mirror for Cultivating the Heart." Despite only half a year of study, she had a profound understanding of these texts.

Building on their education in the inner chambers, along with their innate intelligence and diligent practice, many women from these households gained fame in the fields of painting and calligraphy. Figures like Ye Xiaoluan, Li Yin, Xi Peilan, Luo Qilan, Fang Weiyi, and Huang Yuanjie excelled in these arts, just to name a few.

For these women in the inner chambers, their pursuit of literature and art was primarily for personal refinement. Many of them expressed the idea of "self-soothing" or "self-amusement" through their poetry and prefaces. This stemmed from their awareness of the public's perception of feminine virtues. During the Ming and Qing periods, although society was relatively tolerant of women's creative endeavors, the notion that women should focus on domestic duties and education in feminine virtues persisted. Scholars like Gu Ruopu criticized women for engaging in public activities, stating, "In respectable families, the inner chamber should not even be

heard from, yet they engage in public exchanges. What is the purpose of such behavior?"

As a result, the creative works of these women, including poems and paintings, were often "burned" or destroyed and not passed down to later generations. The performative aspect of their actions has long been a topic of discussion and interest in academia. As Stephen Owen pointed out, when an author attempts to erase something from literature, readers are inevitably left unaware of what the author removed, adding a deeper layer of meaning to the act of "erasing" within literature.

Regardless of the significance of their actions, this behavior reflects the courage and challenges women faced when trying to present their creative works to the public in the context of their time.

Dorothy Ko once pointed out that many social identities of women, such as wives, concubines, professional artists, courtesans, and famous courtesans, are rarely static throughout their lives. Due to different life experiences, women's identities often change from one role to another. As mentioned earlier, when facing adversity, women from the inner chambers of households no longer remained sheltered and secluded. Their talents in painting and calligraphy could be transformed into a means of supporting themselves and their families. Selling their literary and artistic works as commodities was a challenging endeavor, and it was not a common practice. Such actions were often driven by circumstances, such as economic hardship or the need to step out of the confines of the inner chambers.

During the Ming and Qing periods, some female poets resorted to selling their artwork for survival. Examples of women who made a living through art include Zhang Hongqiu, Chen Shu, Ma Quan, Zhuang Caizhi, Zhu Lüyun, Zhou Shuxi, and Ren Xia, among others. For instance, Zhang Hongqiu wrote a poem titled "Unable to Exchange Paintings for Rice in Autumn," expressing her humble wish to exchange her paintings for rice. Chen Shu's son mentioned that his mother was skilled in painting, and her works were highly sought after, fetching several rolls of silk in exchange for her paintings, which she would then trade for rice.

In turbulent times, the plight of female artists became even more precarious. Compared to the relatively stable but modest lives of the aforementioned female artists, those in tumultuous circumstances faced greater hardships. For instance, the women from the Xiangjiang region during the late Ming period, mentioned in a previous chapter, wrote poems to be sold in the market. They set aside their pride as inner chamber ladies and shared their poetry with the public, expressing their humble desire to

be recognized and supported by discerning individuals. This illustrates their strong survival instincts.

In "Notes on Female Poets," there is an account of Zhu Yuanshi, a destitute woman from Qiantang, who begged for food with her poetry during the summer of the Jiwei year (1869). Another example is the renowned late Qing female poet Zuo Xijia, who made a living by selling books and paintings for several decades after experiencing the ravages of war. Her poems also describe her act of selling books and paintings to sustain herself. For example, in her poem "In Praise of Min'er's Victory at Nangong," she wrote: "Turning back to my humble thatched cottage with a solitary lamp, I play music on the zither to keep warm in the cold night. For twenty years, I have labored over books and scrolls, and painted over three thousand works. Who would understand my hardship and loneliness? My house was moved three times in my pursuit of learning." These verses clearly depict the hardships and poverty she endured in her life.

Similar to Zuo Xijia, the well-known poet Shen Shanbao, who enjoyed a happy family life during her childhood, came from the prominent Wu Xing clan of Shen. Her father, Shen Xuelin, held an official position, and he placed great emphasis on her education in poetry. In her poems, she expressed her gratitude for the teachings she received from her father: "I should learn from Cao E but feel unworthy. In my youth, I wasted my father's classical texts. With idle moments from embroidery, I indulged in composing ancient poems." Her mother, Wu Huansu, was also an accomplished and refined lady. Shen Shanbao fondly recalled her childhood, especially the summer days when her mother and her sisters-in-law would row boats and enjoy outings, reciting poems and toasting to their hearts' content. She would reminisce about these idyllic memories in her poems, with lines like "Year after year, we set off for a transcendent journey, sailing on green waters and amid blue mountains." Her early exposure to poetry through her family upbringing nurtured her talents. In her own words, she "recognized the words 'zhi' and 'wu' at the age of four and excelled in singing and reciting." She easily memorized the poems from the Three Tang and Six Dynasties periods. She often wrote verses like "Upon completing a poem, I earned my parents' delight."

However, in 1816, her father took his own life due to official disputes and political struggles. Shen Shanbao's poems directly addressed this tragedy and the political corruption within the Qing court. She wrote, "With a mere seven-foot body, he sought to rectify the corrupt world. Why should he be blamed for the turmoil caused? Perhaps the political system was weak." Although she expressed a strong desire for revenge, she felt

powerless to take action, lamenting her "weak and feeble" disposition. Her family faced numerous challenges, including the need to bring her father's remains back home, her mother's poor health, and the expenses of educating her two brothers and three younger siblings. Shen Shanbao had to shoulder the responsibility of supporting her family, which included eight members. In her poem "Boarding a Boat and Sighing," she vividly described the chaos and difficulties brought about by these family upheavals and her own suffering:

*Boarding a boat, I let out a sigh,  
The turbulent scene appears before my eyes.  
My hometown is far away, and my loved ones are gone,  
Tears fall in the cabin, my heart heavy with sorrow.  
I had siblings to share my joys and sorrows,  
But now, I am left all alone.  
Once a high-spirited and independent young girl,  
Now, I am reduced to this pitiful state.  
I sit in a boat, facing the horizon,  
The endless river stretches out before me.  
I gaze at the water, my heart aches with longing,  
For the hometown and family I have lost.*

In these verses, Shen Shanbao conveyed her deep sense of loss and the challenges she faced as the sole provider for her family. She had to navigate the difficult waters of life alone, facing uncertainty and hardship.

The lives of female poets like Shen Shanbao and Zuo Xijia exemplify the struggles and hardships they endured during turbulent times. These women, once raised in comfort and educated in poetry and art, were forced to use their talents as a means of survival, selling their literary and artistic works to support themselves and their families. Despite the adversity they faced, they persevered and continued to create, leaving behind a legacy of poetry that reflects both their personal experiences and the larger social and political context of their time.

Distant travelers to Hu Lin come, Admiring the resplendent Golden Cow Lake. Now I depart from the lake's embrace, In dire straits, why must I go this way?

In youth, I indulged in poetry and song, Inscribing words both in the East and West. Then, I learned the art of brush and ink, For self-amusement, I continued to invest.

Little did I know, these talents I'd employ, To forge a livelihood, my heart would employ. My father, once an official in Yu Zhang, Faced turmoil in the vast bureaucratic sea.

Suddenly, stern frost brought a fall from grace, Both his clean sleeves,

and our fortune, lost their place. My mother and her chicks, together they'd go, Our home in distress, with no place to show.

Though I diligently worked the well and mortar, We lacked the means, with no reserves to offer. Dust gathered on pots and stoves, time took its toll, Bean water, our daily sustenance, remained a mere trickle.

How I wished for relatives or friends to aid, In our hour of peril, for a helping hand to be displayed. The vagaries of fortune, with harshness and chill, Both then and now, hearts remain unchanged still.

Those who once sought to serve and rise high, Now mockingly return, without a sigh. Though I do not boast or flaunt my plight, With a nurturing heart, I endeavor to set right.

Rather than sit idle, waiting to decline, I'd rather call upon those who are mine. A hundred miles with rice on my back I'd stride, As the teachings of sages, I've heard far and wide.

Though my brush and ink may lack in finesse, I dare to share my cherished gems, no less. Hoping for an easier path to rise above, Why quibble over trifles, instead, let's forge love.

Beyond Yuan River, stretching a thousand miles wide, Many noble souls in its vicinity reside. Like the Yan Stone and the Yeng Cauldron so pure, May they distinguish good from falsehood, for sure.

I tug at my dear one's hem, and bid her adieu, With my brother, I part from the homestead we knew. Autumn waters, casting a sail's reflection in view, My heart's journey, like an ice jar, continues anew.

This is a rare long poem by a female poet that narrates the entirety of her life, centered on her journey of selling paintings for a living. Just as the poem describes, Shen's father returned home empty-handed, despite his past successes. After her mother's return to Zhejiang, she attempted to rely on her hometown relatives for help, but the harsh reality was that "poverty returned to the old hometown, and it was hard to find support." The family had reached a point where "in the spacious hall, bean water could no longer be offered, and in the narrow lanes, dust frequently covered the ladle."

In contrast to her past life filled with melodies and compliments, she humorously contrasts it with the present, where no one extends a helping hand. She satirizes the fickleness of the world. In such circumstances, she realized she had no one to rely on and made the determined choice to support herself. She recalled her childhood skill in painting for self-amusement. Rather than passively awaiting her fate, she decided to make a living by selling her artwork. Her current motivation was no longer the joy she found in painting in her youth; instead, she simply hoped that her paintings would earn her some much-needed money to sustain her family.

Faced with a situation where her "whole family was in dire poverty and illness," she spent a decade tirelessly selling her paintings, diligently honing her skills. As more art lovers sought her work, her reputation grew. Yet, just as her family's fortunes began to turn for the better, her sister and mother abandoned her when she was away. She worked strenuously, her eyebrows thinning as her waistline dwindled, single-handedly raising funds for her family's burial expenses. She managed to bury eight coffins, and by that time, she was twenty-seven years old.

This situation prompts another question: why couldn't her brothers bear the responsibility of supporting the family? They had disappeared, as Zhang Shihong surmises in his essay "Talent Anxiety and Gender Awareness: Insights from Shen Shanbao's Literary Activities as a Ming-Qing Female Poet." He uses the story of Sun Feihuo surrounding Pujiu Temple in "The West Chamber" to deduce why Shen's brothers seemed incapable of providing for the family. He argues that literary works often assign a brother to the female protagonist, even if that brother has virtually no remarkable achievements. This is because "filial impiety, which comes in three forms, is epitomized by having no heir." Maintaining this ideal family model, especially the expected role of a son in carrying on the family line, serves as an essential basis for the self-sacrifice and affirmation of female family members.

Therefore, the act of a woman selling paintings in the marketplace, to some extent, received silent consent from men. Although male poets in the literary world, who often advocated for women's confinement at home, voiced objections, they also benefited from the convenience of this arrangement. From the perspective of the development of women's literature, they tolerated women's related actions because of these benefits, and, to some extent, they expanded the forms of women's literature and avenues for its dissemination. However, from a male perspective, female authors' roles still adhered to traditional norms set by men. As a result, the prosperity of women's literature never truly arrived.

## 5. TUTORING IN THE WOMEN'S CHAMBERS

Through the examples of individuals like Shen Shanbao and the flourishing discussion of female educators in the "Chapters on Chaste Virtue," we find references to female poets in Jiaxing. They were mentioned as "reciting books while supporting the bed." Similarly, Shen Yixiu had already orally instructed her daughters in "Mao Shi" and "The

Song of Everlasting Regret" when they were three or four years old. This highlights the emphasis that parents placed on cultivating the virtues and talents of young women in the Ming and Qing dynasties. During this period, there were approximately three main avenues for female education.

The first avenue was education within the family. In various regions of Jiangnan, family norms often required the gathering of relatives for instructional sessions. For young girls, these gatherings typically involved elder family members explaining stories of filial piety and virtuous women. These experiences were frequently recorded in tomb inscriptions. Parents were also common instructors for their daughters. Unmarried girls would stay by their parents' side, and many female poets mentioned being educated by their parents. For example, Puzhen from Xishan, also known as Shen Shanbao, was known to be "born intelligent, and under the guidance of her mother, Madam Shen Ru, she learned about female arts and memorized the stories of virtuous women. As a result, she developed a deep fondness for them."

Another option was receiving instruction from the husband's family. For instance, Zhu Derong's mother-in-law was the renowned female poet, Shang Jinglan. Her poetry and writing were often guided by her mother-in-law. Qi's family of talented women often engaged in collaborative poetry, attracting visits from numerous literati and talented women, which fostered a culture of literary gatherings.

In some households where parents might not excel in teaching or were occupied with other affairs, a need arose for a different solution. In such cases, some girls were educated by family tutors known as "guishushi" or "tutors in the women's chambers." This role had a long history, similar to the pre-Qin era when aristocratic families had maternal teachers. During the Yuan and Ming periods, wealthy and influential families also hired teachers to educate their daughters at home. These teachers came to the homes of employers and taught their daughters basic literary knowledge, painting skills, and an appreciation for poetry. Tomb inscriptions of some women from Jiangnan often mentioned "learning from the female tutor," indicating the popularity of "guishushi."

These "guishushi" usually came from families that had fallen in status. Many of them received early education and underwent training in the customs and skills befitting young women in the women's chambers. They possessed good cultural qualities and had a high aesthetic sense. Of course, there were also affluent "guishushi." For example, the female painter Su Wenshu had a privileged background. Nevertheless, her outstanding painting skills attracted many students, and she established her own school

at home to accept students.

Gao Yanyi, when exploring the role of "guishushi," considered these women as architects of a reconstructed female living space. They comfortably traversed the boundaries within the household. However, it's important to acknowledge that their existence didn't fundamentally disrupt the integrity of the women's chambers. In fact, as discussed in the previous section regarding women selling books and paintings, the education received by women was realized and often promoted within a male-dominated society. The education that women received was to a certain extent shaped by changing male preferences and demands for female aesthetics. While women seemingly gained opportunities for education on a personal level, the system itself remained controlled by male literati, and women were still trapped within the grasp of male influence. Therefore, this profession was relatively fluid and subject to change. The nature of this work and its fluidity provided women who had experienced upheaval and needed to sustain themselves with a new path. Through this role, they earned economic rewards, allowing them to establish themselves in turbulent times. As mentioned earlier, Land Mei, unable to rely on needlework for survival, supplemented her income by teaching. Similarly, Wujiang female poet Lu Hui, who sought refuge in Shanghai during times of chaos, mentioned teaching female students to make a living. She wrote, "Teaching female disciples, earning some provisions to support the family, but often struggling to have a full meal, eventually succumbing to sorrow."

Another example is Gui Maoyi, who, due to her family's decline, supported herself by working as a "guishushi." Pei Lan, in her poem "Escaping Disaster Seven Times and Now Teaching Five Female Students by the Yong River," recounted her experiences as a "guishushi."

The most famous example of this is Huang Yuanjie and Wang Duanshu. After her father, Wang Siren, starved himself to death to resist the Ming regime, and her husband, Ding Zhaozhong, lost his official position, Wang Duanshu's relationship with her brothers was strained. They lived in extremely difficult circumstances during times of war and famine. Friends such as Wu Shan, Qian Zifang, and Zhou Youyuan occasionally offered them assistance. When things became especially dire, they had to sell calligraphy, paintings, and letters. Wang Duanshu's poems from this period, such as "For Master Rui," "Thirty for Master Rui," "Yinongji: A Brief Account of Yang Zhonglie," and "For Master Qian Zifang and Presented to Zhou Youyuan," described their hardships.

Faced with such dire circumstances, Wang Duanshu chose to seek employment outside of her home. It was during this period that she gained

the admiration of Wu Shan. In her poem "Reply to Lady Wu of Floating Emerald Pavilion," she mentioned her role as a "guishushi," saying, "I have always lived in humble poverty, knowing only myself. The world wants to kill me, fearing my talent and intellect. The mad bees stung my red countenance, and my disrupted soul returned to a green mound as expected. Quietly, the smoke drifts like green willows, while I, like a yellow phoenix, cannot keep up. This sentiment is willing to win fame in the history of art, so I became a female teacher in the Zhu family." In Wu Shan's residence, she received the respect she had long been deprived of. With Wu Shan's introduction, her financial difficulties gradually disappeared. Moreover, she also got to know more renowned male and female talents. Their gatherings, singing, and other activities spread Wang Duanshu's reputation far and wide. Ruan Yuan's "Record of Abodes in Zhejiang" mentioned, "(Wang Duanshu) resided in Wulin and interacted with scholars from all around. She generously wielded her brush, not hesitating to compete in the same hall with guests."

She finally opened up her own space and compiled "The Poetic Weaver of Noble Women," with a preface by Xu Zhaoxiang and an inscription by Qian Qianyi. She accepted Li Yu's invitation to write a preface for "The Parrot," and even Emperor Shunzhi invited her to teach the palace consorts. In the middle of the Shunzhi era, it was planned to imitate Cao Da's story, and she was invited to teach the palace consorts. However, she respectfully declined the request. Up to that point, Wang Duanshu had become extremely famous. Later, when there was no need for her to struggle for a living, she and her husband withdrew from the world and lived a reclusive life in seclusion. In the family they formed, she became the main source of livelihood.

In Gao Yanyi's book "Guishushi," she used Wang Duanshu as an example to break traditional social roles and old cognitive frameworks between men and women through the lens of Joan Scott's theory of "gender as a social construct." However, it's important to note that Wang Duanshu's choice of this identity and participation in cultural activities received support from her husband. This does not mean her actions were fully accepted by men. For instance, in her poem "Difficult to Leave Home," her brothers had considerable concerns:

[Note: Due to character limitations, I will continue with the next part in the next response.]

Leaving is difficult, leaving is difficult, leaving is filled with embarrassment. Eldest brother questions younger sister, hurriedly carrying her books. My younger brothers seek nothing, only asking our friends to

hold fast. Even our father's reputation within the realm, how could one support himself under its shadow? Eldest brother and others prepare our clothing, while the younger brothers provide sustenance. If I abandon this, who can I rely on? My voice laments, and my spirit is downcast. I, in response, speak to all my younger brothers, discussing a more lasting strategy. Ah, the venerable man composes a literary garden; his descendants seek only for volumes. You, sister, are unwell and indolent, incapable of handling a ruler and a measuring tape. Your upper garments are not in tatters, and your morning meal barely sustains you till evening. Pondering quietly on today's words, I still recall the events of last year. The cold wind sweeps through the hidden chambers, and living in the marketplace is still like solitude. With my tongue toil, I temporarily make a living, content with grasping the brush. Moreover, in this spring with the warm sun, I can avoid freezing and starving. Eldest and younger brothers, fortunate without any emptiness, in past years, we admired the reputation most. When the brothers heard of your one piece of writing, their faces turned red, each secretly glancing at one another. The eldest brother, saying he has urgent matters, must return first, while the younger ones still desire to go elsewhere. In the end, it was only on the third day that we had no choice. I brought books and wept, my heart heavy with sorrow. Indeed, I now understand the words of the Mao poetry: "The words of brothers are not to be trusted" (D. s. Wang).

From the poem, it's not hard to discern the discontent of Wang Duanshu's brothers regarding her decision to leave and work as a "guishushi." They question why she would choose to submit to the authority of others, citing their father's reputation as a reason for concern. However, in her confrontation with her brothers, Wang Duanshu uses the hardships her family has faced to justify her actions. She highlights the dire circumstances, with her father leaving behind only books, her sister being bedridden with illness, insufficient clothing, and daily sustenance being a struggle. This leads to her contemplating using her literary skills to make a living, expressing the idea of temporarily cultivating her talents.

While her brothers do not openly approve of her decision, they do not directly oppose her either. Instead, they use excuses to leave the conversation. In the end, Wang Duanshu reluctantly embarks on her journey, as she feels she has no other choice. Her self-narrative can be seen as a form of self-defense against her brothers' disapproval.

This narrative illustrates the struggles and conflicts surrounding women's choices in a society deeply rooted in Confucian gender norms. Although women like Wang Duanshu were able to expand their roles and assert their

agency to some extent, their choices often resulted from the passive constraints of their circumstances. Their experiences were shaped within the existing Confucian gender framework, and their growth did not necessarily disrupt the dominant male-centric societal culture.

The life of a "guishushi" was not only marked by hard work and toil but also by a sense of dependency on others. Wang Duanshu's poem "Three-Month Wind and Rain, Lady Wu Hinders My Return" highlights this lack of freedom, describing how she was not allowed to enjoy her own space and solitude. Even more distressing, other women faced even greater helplessness in their situations.

One of Wang Duanshu's close friends, Huang Yuanjie, experienced a fate similar to hers. She was a talented woman skilled in poetry, literature, calligraphy, and painting. After marrying Yang Shigong and enduring the turmoil of the late Ming period, she was abducted during a time of conflict, leading to a period of extreme poverty. Huang Yuanjie resorted to selling books and paintings to survive. Later in life, she turned to work as a "guishushi" for her livelihood. In her later years, she was forced to take on a teaching role, which caused her great frustration. Her life was marked by constant instability, and she faced numerous hardships. This challenging way of life forced her into a nomadic existence, exacting a heavy toll on her. She described one particularly painful episode where her son tragically drowned while they were on a boat journey, followed by the untimely death of her daughter. Eventually, Huang Yuanjie passed away, succumbing to the hardships she endured during her nomadic journey.

The life of a "guishushi" was fraught with uncertainty and vulnerability, and it often led to unexpected tragedies. Huang Yuanjie's story serves as a poignant example of the hardships faced by women who pursued this path.

In conclusion, it is crucial to recognize that the survival strategies employed by women during turbulent times were often choices born out of necessity. Even though educated women in the inner chambers of their households served as pioneers and representatives of their gender, their actions were still largely guided by the traditional norms of female virtue. They often used family responsibilities, such as caring for children or attending to extended family members, as justifications for their actions. Additionally, they cited practical difficulties, such as food shortages or the absence of male relatives, as reasons for seeking livelihoods outside the home. Fundamentally, these choices remained within the framework of female virtue.

However, amid the chaos of turbulent times, when traditional norms and societal structures were disrupted, these female poets did not find

themselves powerless as expected. They faced the crises of changing family dynamics and financial hardships, and while they adhered to ethical and moral boundaries, they used their skills and knowledge to struggle for survival. Their ability to adapt and thrive under adverse circumstances demonstrates their resilience and resourcefulness. Nevertheless, it's essential to acknowledge that their actions were made possible within the prevailing male-dominated discourse of the time.

From a historical and cultural perspective, the economic and cultural landscape of the Ming and Qing dynasties did nurture the growth of these women's potential. Their innate resilience and silent determination, even in adversity, allowed them to bear the costs of their lives. The financial independence they achieved through their own efforts provided them with a sense of security and the possibility of self-reliance. This can be seen as a nascent awakening of female consciousness, albeit one that emerged in a somewhat passive manner.

In summary, the survival strategies adopted by women in the Ming and Qing dynasties were shaped by the challenging circumstances of their times, and their actions were influenced by both traditional gender roles and the evolving economic and cultural landscape. While they operated within the constraints of established norms, their resilience and resourcefulness marked a subtle awakening of female agency, illustrating the complex interplay between tradition and change in Chinese society.

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