CHAPTER EIGHT

FEMALE SELF-FASHIONING IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA: HOW THE GENTLEWOMAN AND THE COURTESAN EDITED HER STORY AND REWROTE HER STORY

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The Concept of Self-fashioning

Women in seventeenth-century China publicly set out to fashion the female self—by editing and publishing their own and other women’s writings.1 As Stephen Greenblatt has described in his Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare, the idea of self-fashioning is concerned with the “deliberate shaping in the formation and expression of identity.”2 It rests on the perception that “there is in the early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities.”3 Moreover, self-fashioning “is always, though not exclusively, in language.”4

In late imperial China—an era that includes the time of Shakespeare—we find such accounts, too, of figures who are “engaged in their own acts of selection and shaping and who seem to drive themselves toward the most sensitive regions of their culture, to express even, by design, to embody its dominant satisfactions and anxieties.”5 Greenblatt concentrates on the stories of middle-

class male writers in the Western world. In this volume Rana Mitter looks at self-fashioning in the modern print and press culture of early twentieth-century China. Focusing on male writers and editors, he tracks changes “in the way in which self-presentation takes place through writing” in China.6

This chapter changes the gender perspective and turns to women writers and editors. In seventeenth-century China, too, we find that art is not created in a vacuum and does not exist without links and references to the world around it:

[The written word is self-consciously embedded in specific communities, life situations, structures of power. We do not have direct access to these figures or their shared culture, but the operative condition of all human understanding—of the speech of our contemporaries as well as of the writings of the dead—is that we have indirect access or at least that we experience our constructions as the lived equivalent of such access.]7

The following discussion aims to gain such access to the lives and culture of two women writers and editors from different social backgrounds—Shen Yixiu (1590-1635),8 a gentlewoman from a ruling-class family and Liu Rushi (1618-1664),9 a celebrated courtesan—in seventeenth-century Jiangnan, the Yangzi delta region, by examining their own words, the cultural discourse that their contemporaries constructed around them, and the historical context that enveloped their lives and their literary works.

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1 This essay is based on a paper “Women and the Publishing Boom in Seventeenth-Century Jiangnan” presented at the XIVth EACS (European Association of Chinese Studies) conference, Moscow, Russia, August 26-28, 2002. I would like to thank Professors Grace Fong and Richard Hall, and Dr Chloé Starr for their valuable comments.


3 Ibid.

4 Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning, p. 9.

5 Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning, p. 6.

6 See Chapter Five of this volume.

7 Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning, p. 7.


9 Liu Rushi is also known as Liu Shi or Liu Yin. On her changing names, see below.
The Gentlewoman Editor

We hear the voice of a late Ming (1368-1644) lady telling her husband what she wanted:

Although our daughters have passed away, we may rejoice in the fact that they were not the only ladies with great literary talent in the world. It is truly regrettable that nowadays, as in the past, their works are lost or remain in obscurity and have rarely been recorded, but should there really be such limits? ...

The voice belongs to Shen Yixiu of Wujiang near Lake Tai in Suzhou prefecture (modern Jiangsu province), a poetess, gentry wife, and mother of thirteen, among them famous scholars and poetesses. She is speaking after the deaths of two of her daughters, the poetess and calligrapher Ye Wanwan (1610-1632) and Ye Xiaoluan (1616-1632), a teenage poetess of legendary fame, and before her own demise, sometime between 1632 and 1635. The premature deaths of her beloved daughters had affected her badly and she poured out her sorrow in her poetry. The pieces written after their deaths are full of dreams about meeting them again, cold sleepless nights spent reminiscing about the past when they were still alive, and her 'tears of blood'.

She thus turns to her husband with the idea of compiling and editing an anthology of women’s writings:

Would you help me in an extensive search throughout the empire to gather together those works by women that have not been published yet? In my spare time I would like to compile and edit them so that they will not all perish.

Such an enterprise would help her remember and immortalize women as talented and erudite as the daughters she had lost.

Her voice comes to us after her death and through the consciousness of her husband, the genteel but poverty-stricken literatus Ye Shaoyuan (1589-1648), as he recorded his recollection of her words.

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10 Ye Shaoyuan, "Bayu", in WM17, 1: 336.
11 On Ye Wanwan’s death in 1632 (often wrongly given as 1633), see Ji Qin, “Qinan”, WM17, 1: 5.
12 On Shen Yixiu’s life and poetry, see WWC1, pp. 266-78; Wil Heijma and Beata Grant, The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 382-90.
13 Ye Shaoyuan, "Bayu", WM17, 1: 356.
14 On Ye Shaoyuan and his family, see Ye Dehai, comp., Wuchang Yishi zupu
in a colophon when editing their daughter’s poetry collection. Her voice thus reaches us tinged with his grief and nostalgia, through the filter of his mind and editorial agenda, inscribed with the subtext of his voice, mixing memory and the desire to reproduce her words.

Shen Yixiu’s words disclose her aspirations to edit literature. In her days this was something most unusual for a woman. How did she manage to do it? Why should she have bothered and what did she hope to achieve? What was her goal and what were the elements in the society of her time that enabled her to proceed? How did she and others—the men and women around her—perceive such literary activities? What were their significance and consequences? What impact did the contemporary discourse have on her and what influence did she exert on her world? These questions may serve as guidelines as we try to recover the voices and hear the discourse telling the gentlemanwoman editor’s tale. This tale involves more than one editor at work on various levels: the woman who aspires to edit other women’s works, the man who edits their womenfolk’s voices, and finally the modern historian and critic whose consciousness edits, filters and selects her source material from the past.

A caveat at the outset: it is only fair to acknowledge the bias of the modern reader who approaches the subject from within his/her own culture, value system and ethnocentric assumptions. We have to tread carefully. Modern scholars agree that women in late imperial China were far from being the repressed victims of a feudal system in desperate need of liberation, but still tend to look for elements of modern Western theoretical discourse on power and gender in traditional Chinese culture. This “anachronistic interpretation of women’s literary creativity”, as Susan Mann writes in her critique of recent studies of women in traditional China, “is a reminder that contemporary Western feminism may remain parochial in its insistence that its own telos of freedom and agency be at work in every record of women’s lives.” On the other hand Mann also acknowledges the pitfalls of an “atheoretical” approach that tends to result in “underanalyzed discussions” of female nature or women’s feelings.

It is our task, then, to analyse the voices as we can hear them today and the positions of the speakers within their contemporary cultural discourse. Rather than attempting to reconstruct a ‘true’ image of the past or to superimpose modern concepts and jargon onto the world of the past, we need to deconstruct the discourse of that time and place, rethink its cultural context and see how its dynamics shaped and changed the world. This study uses both literary and non-literary sources to retrace the social network of negotiations and exchanges in which late imperial Chinese citizens operated. The sources include prefaces, postscripts and commentaries, such as the colophon by Shen Yixiu’s husband that transmits her voice across time and space, alongside the critical and poetic works through which Shen Yixiu and other women writers and editors speak to us directly.

Gender and Tradition

When the late Ming gentlewoman Shen Yixiu decides to compile the literary works of women, she becomes one of the first late imperial Chinese women known to have joined in the vogue of editing anthologies. As an anthologist of poetry and as an editor of women’s writings, she follows not only in the footsteps of men but emulates the very example of Confucius: the Shi jing (Book of odes) would have served as a model, for Shen Yixiu and her contemporaries believed

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17 The only other known woman editor who might have been active as early as the late Ming period is Fang Weiyi (1564-1664). The publication dates of her anthologies Gongju shishih (History of prose writing in palace and boudoir), Gongju wenshi (History of prose writing in palace and boudoir) are unknown; Hu Wendai, Lidai jianzi chuaxue kai (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985) [hereafter: ENQZ], 81, 803.
that this classic also contains poems by women. In following this orthodox and authoritative model, an editor would be able to claim a place within Confucian tradition.

Literary anthologies specifically devoted to women's writings are known to have existed from the fifth century onwards: the modern bibliographer Hu Wenlai lists nine works from the Nanbei chao (Southern and Northern dynasties) period (222-589), one from the Tang dynasty and two from the Song.22

Women's anthologies appeared in larger numbers only in the Ming dynasty from the 1550s onwards. Grace Fong has shown that the late Ming appears to be "the incipient period when more women began to pick up the brush and compose poetry."23 Although women appeared as the new cultural producers and consumers in the late Ming and may have also played a part in the popularity of women's anthologies, these works were commonly compiled by male editors and published as commercial ventures intended primarily for a male readership.24

The earliest known late Ming anthology of women's writings is a collection of poetry and prose entitled Tongguan xinhuan (New compilation of works by red writing brushes) compiled by Zhang Zhixiang (1507-1587), a native of the cultural centre of Songjiang, in 1554. This collection includes women's prose and poetry from the Zhou to the Yuan dynasties, but not from the Ming. Only a few years later another anthology appeared that included women's writings from the Ming dynasty: in 1557 Tian Yiheng (1524-1574) from Qiantang (Hangzhou Bay), a minor official who retired to the West Lake to pursue his interests in poetry, party games, wine-tasting, the tea ceremony and exotic foods, published Shihui shi (A history of women poets) which featured the works of twenty-six Ming poetesses.25 In the preface to his anthology Tian Yiheng, the son of the famous scholar-official and highest degree-holder Tian Rucheng (ca. 1500-after 1563, jinshi 1526), reasons:

- Even when it comes to the composition of couples at poetry parties, it is the talented ladies who outshine everyone else. Their knack of exploring a topic in great depth upsets the others so much that they put down their writing brushes.26

He maintains that literary talent appears in equal measures in men and women:

- From the days of the Zhou dynasty onwards, there has been no lack of [talented] people in each dynastic era. The great differences in the prominence [of men's works] and the obscurity [of women's works] arise from the very fact that nobody has bothered to collect and collate the latter.27

The reasons for the new interest in women's writings are complex: they have their roots in a change of intellectual climate, the formation of new ideals among the literati, the rise in women's literacy, the creation of a new reading audience, a new market for books and new developments in the publishing industry. These trends in publishing will be discussed in detail below.

In Tian Yiheng's opinion the act of editing women's poetry equals in importance the composition of the Confucian classic Shi jing.28 For Tian Yiheng, it is not an act of radical innovation but one that remains true to orthodox tradition. Nonetheless Tian Yiheng's attitude must have sounded iconoclastic to late Ming ears—and it was in tune with the most radical thinkers of his time. A disciple of the Taizhong school of thought, the heretic philosopher Li Zhi (1527-1602) praised popular literature while dismissing the Confucian canon because he considered the former to be better in expressing the author's "child-like mind" (tongxin).29 Late Ming readers deemed women writers to

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22 Nanbei chao anthologies of women's writings generally appear under the title Fanen ji (Women's collection); the Tang anthology of women's poetry is entitled Toutai ziyang (New songs from the Jasper Pond, comp. Cai Shengfeng); the Song dynasty collections are Fanen wenjiang, comp. Chen Pengqian, and Song ju guogu shi, comp. Wang Yuanliang, cf. ENZG, 875-6.
23 Hu Wenlai's catalogue identifies thirty-one collections from the Ming dynasty, ENZG, 876-84.
26 On Tian Yiheng (1524-1574), see WHTC, p. 733 (which dates Shihui shi to ca. 1570); on Yiheng and his father Tian Rucheng, see DAB, pp. 1268-88.
27 ENZG, 877.
28 ENZG, 876.
29 ENZG, 877.
30 On Li Zhi, see DAB, pp. 807-18; William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed. and comp.
be particularly good at this. Li Zhi's ideas impressed and inspired his friends, the three Yuan brothers from Gong'an (in modern Hunan province), Yuan Hongdao (1568-1610), Zongdao (1560-1600) and Zhongdao (1570-1624). Their Gong'an school of literary criticism won the admiration of other avant-garde artists and intellectuals, including the dramatist of emotions Tang Xianzu (1550-1616).32

A generation later the literary leader and eminent scholar-official Qian Qianyi (1608-1664, jinshi 1610) and the best-selling poet and anthologist Zhong Xing (1574-1624, jinshi 1610) also joined the Gong'an movement.33 Zhong Xing became the founder of the Jingling school of poetry which postulated that a poet should find inspiration in the vital essence of earlier poetry, its xingling, or native sensibility. This school of poetry also valued originality over imitation.34 He departed from the Gong'an school in seeking refinement in poetry. To advocate his literary choices he published several poetry anthologies,35 and he is also credited with the editorship of a comprehensive late Ming anthology of women writers, the Mingyuan shiqu (Poetic retrospective of famous ladies, ca. 1626) and the authorship of its preface.

Late Ming literati celebrated women's works, for they perceived them to embody values and qualities they desired but found lacking in men. Concepts such as innocence, or the child-like mind (tongxin), inspirational gusto (xingling), and emotions (qing) converged in the


30 On the Yuan brothers, see Hung Ming-shu, "Yuan Hung-tao and the Late Ming Literary and Intellectual Movement", PhD thesis: University of Wisconsin, 1974.
33 Cf. Niehauzer, Indiana Companion, p. 369. Zhong was criticized by Qian Qianyi, however. Mao Jia of the prestigious Jigou publishing house also printed Zhong Xing's works.
34 Gushi gui (Homecoming to ancient poetry) and Tangsha gui (Homecoming to Tang poetry), both 1617.

new ideals of stylistic femininity and feminine style. Femininity and its perceived attributes of natural expression, elegance and gentility merged in the imagination of the literati as a new ideal. The representation of the female sphere and feminine attributes caught the imagination of editors and anthologists such as Tian Yiheng, Zhong Xing, and their contemporaries.

Armed with such knowledge, Shen Yixiu set her mind on becoming an editor. At that time anthologies of women's works had already come into fashion among the literati,36 Aware of her predecessors, Shen Yixiu marks the differences from her own work in the preface to her anthology:

In our times there are many anthologies of poetry and prose by famous ladies but they mostly tend to transmit [the works of] the past and do not have the breadth to cover the present.37

Editorship places Shen Yixiu into the tradition of the elite male anthologists.38 She expressed her wish to take their work a step further. Shen Yixiu perceived editorship as something desirable, as her words to her husband that opened this chapter show.39 But what exactly did editorship mean to a woman in late imperial times?

In a Gentleman's World

Shen Yixiu's example shows that editorship began to count among the aspirations of an elite woman at a time when the economic boom helped create a hotbed of cultural activity in early seventeenth-century Jiangnan. Literary culture in the Yangzi delta in late imperial China traditionally formed part of the gentlemen's world, the realm of the scholar-officials and the educated elite including the literati (shidu), or 'men of culture' (xuzen), whether they held office or not. The intellectual elite moreover included men of letters who had withdrawn from public life and become recluse, and also other fringe groups such as the unprecedented numbers of exami-

36 See Table 2.
37 WMFTJ, 1: 538.
39 WMFTJ, 1: 356.
nation candidates, failed examesees, those scholars who had given up scholarship and gone into business (qin congshang), and wealthy merchants with cultural aspirations. 40

John Meskill describes the peculiarities of the gentlemen's world in late Ming Jiangnan:

40 On these groups, see Daria Berg, Carnival in China: A Reading of the Xingzhi yinyuan zhuang (Leiden: J. Brill, 2002), pp. 225-76.


tion, scholarship and literary abilities matched those of the literati whom they had to entertain.

In the seventeenth century the gentry women, too, emerged on the literary scene as producers and consumers of culture: they composed poetry, published their works, produced paintings, taught their daughters, and gained influence in literature and the arts as celebrated authors and artists. Gentlewomen displayed the defining traits of their gentility in public by becoming visible as writers, poets and painters. The term gentility is taken to denote the way of the gentleman and gentlewoman, the perceived quality that marked them as belonging to the social and intellectual elite. The Hangzhou matriarch Gu Ruopu (1592-ca.1681), for example, a renowned poet and writer on statecraft and economics, advocated the importance of women’s literary education.43 She defined her vision of gentility for women in terms of acquiring womanly virtue and gracefulness (shu) by means of education, scholarship and learning. Attitudes among the literati changed as talent, beauty and virtue combined to form a new ideal of femininity and elite men valorized not only the courtiers but also the gentry ladies as intellectual companions. Shen Yixiu and Ye Shaojun formed such a companionate married couple, embodying the new romantic ideals of a scholar-husband and a cultured wife.44

For a gentlewoman, editing a literary collection was one way of contributing towards scholarship and taking part in the literary activities of her husband’s world. Shen Yixiu was among the first late imperial Chinese women to undertake such a task. She was well situated to become an editor as she had formed one of the earliest known women’s poetry clubs around her, an informal and domestic network of writing women that mainly consisted of her daughters, relatives and friends.45 When her daughters Waiwan and Xiaowen died, Shen Yixiu edited the manuscripts they left behind. In 1694 the published volumes were distributed among other women poets in the Yangzi delta area.46

Publishing was important, as it placed poetry and scholarship in the public domain. By publishing a literary collection, the editor had the power to lend visibility, fame and immortality to the works and authors included in it. The modern scholar Ellen Widmer has noted that

Women’s editorial work could suppress as well as celebrate female talent, and it tended to emphasize virtue among other evaluative categories; yet there is no doubt that many women writers sought to place their works in the new anthologies of women’s works by women editors.47

As authors, and even more so as editors of poetry, women situated themselves within an imagined tradition of women from the past and created a community among their contemporaries. Editing and publishing meant reaching out towards other women and establishing one’s own place within the literary world, carving out a niche for oneself in the world of elite men.

Longing for One Far Away: A Gentlewoman’s Selection

Shen Yixiu’s editorial efforts resulted in a slim anthology entitled Tienzi (Longing for one far away) comprising two hundred and forty one poems and prose pieces by forty-seven women writers from the Ming era.48 The title alludes to quotations from the Shi jing poems no. 129 and no. 165, which depict a lady longing for her companion, or “that person” (yiren) who is far away, as she stands on the bank of a river among the green rushes and reeds.49 Shen Yixiu by analogy postulates the editor’s search for those far away, in this case, the other gentlewomen who expressed their feelings in their writings and whose works were difficult to come by, but her longing might also have been for those far away daughters from whom death had parted her forever and whom she could commemorate and immortalize only in her thoughts and in her literary pursuits. Poetry had the power to connect these women across time and space:

43 On Gu Ruopu, see Ko, Teachers, pp. 139; 163-4; 236-40; 245f; 248; 281; WWTC, pp. 302-313.
44 On the new romantic ideals, see Ko, Teachers, pp. 183ff.
45 On Shen’s domestic poetry club, see Ko, Teachers, pp. 202-7.
48 Shen Yixiu, Tienzi, in WMTJ, 1: 537-90.
the gentlewomen who communicated with each other only through their writings and those with whom they could communicate no longer except in their writing.

Her husband Ye Shaoyuan published Shen Xiyu’s anthology in 1636, a year after her death. When she was gone, he expressed his sadness at the unfinished state of the works she had left behind: “Her testament of posthumous writings lies in her portfolio. I mourn in vain over the manuscripts she left behind.” Perhaps he found solace in completing the task of publishing the volume she had been working on during the last years of her life.

Shen Xiyu perceived editorship as a long-term enterprise. This is how she mused over the task of compiling women’s writings:

After collecting them for a decade or two, we should be able to collate and publish them in one big volume. This would make me so happy, but if their works have been circulating far and wide for a long time, and their reputation has already been firmly established, and their names have been long admired in this world, then I would prefer not to include them alongside the obscure ones.

Her voice again reaches us only through the filter of her husband’s mind: he remembered and recorded her words—as she might have uttered them in conversation with him—in his postface to the collection. Although the anthology remains incomplete and Shen Xiyu did not live to see it in print, the project was probably close to her heart as it gave her the chance to publish works by members of her domestic poetry club—her friends and relatives—as well as her own.

As the organizing principle of her anthology Shen Xiyu chooses to follow the state of publication of the sources, dividing her volume into four main parts and two additional sections:

1. Published works by eighteen authors
2. Unpublished manuscripts by nine authors are listed but two have no entries
3. Writings by six authors acquired through personal transmission
4. Other works by eleven authors found in miscellaneous jottings
5. An appendix containing other scattered texts by two authors whose works she acquired by means of séances
6. Shen Xiyu’s own poetic works.

Shen Xiyu’s preface declares the intent of aiming at comprehensiveness while choosing to omit well-known authors and widely available texts. She moreover focuses on contemporary writers, in contrast to most male editors who generally prefer a “diachronic” sweep across the ages, including works from antiquity, as in Zhang Zhixiang’s mid-sixteenth century anthology. Tian Yiheng collected any women’s writings he could find from antiquity to the Ming without paying attention to literary considerations. Li Hu from Kuaiji (Shaoxing), the editor of the anthology of women’s writings Tongguan zhibian (Compilation of works left by red writing brushes, 1567) organized his material chronologically, too, but subdivided its sections according to moral criteria.

Shen Xiyu’s anthology includes texts from different genres: poems (shi), song lyrics (ci), rhapsodies, and prose, but it remains selective. The selection strategy for the anthology works on the principle of ‘exquisite exclusivity’. Shen Xiyu includes contributions by elite ladies only. Her anthology features no works authored by courtesans—despite their leading position among women writers in her time—or anything a late Ming reader might have deemed erotic.

This selection strategy contrasts with the numerous early seventeenth-century anthologies of women’s writings compiled by male editors. They show an increasingly comprehensive tendency, transcending moral, social, ethnic and even national boundaries.

For example the 1618 preface to Qu Jiusheng’s anthology Nians (Poetic elegies by women) announces:

50 Ko conjectures that Shen Xiyu might have died of tuberculosis or during an epidemic that also took the lives of her daughters; see Ko, *Teachers*, pp. 210, 216.
54 Huang Yuanci and Huang Yuanjie are listed by name but have no entries; *WMTJ*, 1: 573.
55 Shen Xiyu, “Zixiu”, in *WMTJ*, 1: 538. For a translation, see *WWTG*, p. 608.
56 On trends in anthologies by male editors, see Fong, “Gender”, p. 133ff.
58 For a list of titles, see Table 2. On early seventeenth-century anthologies, see Fong, “Gender”, p. 141.
Included in this anthology are works of all sorts of women, be they chaste or lewd, transcendent or mortal, barbarian or Chinese, respectable or mean. Their moral character and deeds are not always worth mentioning. The popular anthology Mingyuan zhigu attributed to Zhong Xing also included the works of gentlewomen, courtesans and a foreign poetess from Korea. Shen Yixiu did not follow the trend towards all-inclusiveness. Even if we regard her volume as an unfinished product that might have included more entries, had she been able to complete it, then it still appears that all-inclusiveness was not her main priority. She focused on including the works of gentlewomen first and foremost.

Shen’s anthology features Fang Weiyi (1585-1668) from Tongcheng (Anhui province), the other late Ming gentlewoman active as a poet and editor. Fang Weiyi’s literary anthologies Gongzui shizi (History of poetry in palace and boudoir) and Gongzui yuanshi (History of prose writing in palace and boudoir) are no longer extant and their publication dates are not known. It is therefore not possible to tell whether she became an editor before or after Shen Yixiu and whether her collections were already published during the Ming dynasty or in the Qing. Fang came from a gentrified family that had both wealth and prestige but she was widowed in her teens and never remarried. She expressed the perpetual hardship she experienced in her life in the copious literary works she left behind.

Yunzi also includes an entry for Tian Yuyan, the daughter of anthologist Tian Yiheng, who did not make it into her father’s collection. Shen Yixiu moreover selected works by her relatives: her nieces Zhou Lanxiu and Shen Huiduan, and her son-in-law’s sister Wang Hui. Her anthology leaves out some leading women writers of the Ming but cites others, such as Huang Yuanjie (d. before 1669), her sister Huang Yuanzhen, and Wu Shan (ca. 1610-ca. 1671) who were already established women poets. These women counted among Shen Yixiu’s friends as they moved among her husband’s circle but she never actually met them face-to-face. It is possible that Shen Yixiu included them mainly for the reason that she knew them.

True to her original idea about an anthology that would help immortalize women whose literary talent would have reminded her of her daughters, Shen Yixiu also selected poems by other women whose fates and (mis)fortunes resembled those of her family: mothers who had lost their daughters and talented poetesses who had died young. She thus included the works of women such as the metropolitan degree holder’s wife Wang Fengxian (d. early seventeenth century) from Huating (Shanghai municipality) and her daughters Zhang Yinyuan and Zhang Yingjing, another scholar’s wife Shen Renlan and her daughter Huang Shude (d. 1626), literatus Tu Long’s daughter Tu Yaose (1576-1601) and her daughter-in-law Shen Tiansun (ca. 1580-1630). Shen Yixiu included verses by the painter and poet Zhou Huizhen, a neighbour of hers who also died young. Shen Yixiu made it explicit that she selected such authors because of the similarity between her and their life stories. On Zhang Yinyuan’s poem “Letter to my Younger Sister”, she remarks: “This resembles closely the feelings shared between my own daughters.” On Wang Fengxian’s poem “Letter sent on an Autumn Night to my Two Daughters Yuan and Qing”, Shen Yixiu notes: “It resembles my own sorrow, so I record this here.”

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60 Cu, *Tangshi*, p. 213.
61 On Wang Fengxian, see WWTJ, pp. 291-98; for a translation of Zhang Yinyuan’s poetry, see WWTJ, pp. 298-303; Shen Renlan’s husband was Huang Jiedi; Huang Shude’s husband was the literatus Tu Yaose; on Tu Long, see DMB, pp. 1324-7; on Tu Yaose and Shen Tiansun (alias Qixiang), see Wulter and Ji-ching Hsu, “Lingerling Fragrance”.
62 Zhou Huizhen’s style name was Yifen.
63 WWTJ, 1: 555.
64 WWTJ, 1: 550.
Shen Yixiu also included those who had sent poems to express their sympathy when her daughters died.

Shen Yixiu’s selection of works concerning highly educated women writers who died young, accompanied by eulogistic writings about them, echoes the literati discourse on the cult of the virgin widow that the leading sixteenth-century scholar Wang Shizhen had sparked with his biography of Tanyangzi in the early 1580s. Wang Shizhen portrayed Tanyangzi, a young gentlewoman from an elite family, as a wise girl who preached to the literati. These men in turn venerated her as an immortal and a goddess. Both the magistrate Tu Long and the scholar-official Shen Maoxue (1539–1582, jinshi 1577), the fathers of the ill-fated young poetesses Tu Yaose and Shen Tianxun, had participated in this cult.59 The figure of the talented but tragic girl-poet became popular with the female reading audience, too, as the craze of women readers and writers for Du Liniang, the fictional heroine of Tang Xianzu’s drama Mudan ting (Peony pavilion, 1589), in the early seventeenth century shows. Shen Yixiu and her husband venerated their late daughters in a similar way as immortals and goddesses.61 Frenesi perpetuates the literati discourse about the talented but tragic woman of letters as a new idol. Shen Yixiu’s anthology continues this discourse from the perspective of the gentlewoman.

Genteel Poverty

The daughter of a literati family and the wife of a highest degree holder, Shen Yixiu enjoys elite status.62 Her paternal family also ranked among the local elite in the Ming/Qing era.63 Her uncle and brothers gained fame as dramatists.64

Shen Yixiu’s writings nonetheless testify to a life of genteel poverty. “Poverty and illness have been afflicting me for ages; it’s unbearable,” she confesses in a poem.65 Yet poverty seems to have been the driving force in her writing. The poem on ‘Poverty and Illness’ declares:

So bleak, so depressing, I’m ill and I worry that the western wind will be icy,
Exacerbating my poverty, extending the autumn days. …
The demon of illness wants to get the soul of poetry to make up an apology,
But will the devil of poverty ever leave this place?66

Ye Shaojunan professed that he “never cared to talk about or handle money.”67 He portrays himself as remaining aloof of such worldly matters and more interested in literary aesthetics. He left it to his wife to consider logistics and find solutions for their financial straits. Perhaps in this sense he motivated Shen Yixiu to become an editor. Yet Shen Yixiu, too, internalized gentlemanly attitudes towards money and wealth. In the biography of her deceased daughter Ye Xiaoluan, she expressed her admiration for this attitude in a woman: “She regarded gold and money as filth. She remained indifferent to desires and did not have great demands. What she enjoyed most was an undisturbed elegance.”68 A gentleman would make it clear that there were more important things in life than money and the acquisition of wealth. Devotion to poetry and literary pursuits—even in the face of poverty—counted among the higher aspirations that became the hallmark of gentility. As a gentlewoman Shen Yixiu internalized these cultural aspirations.

Literary activity presented one way of converting the family cultural capital into prestige or profit.69 Shen Yixiu’s paternal family drama, see Nienhauser, The Indiana Companion, pp. 675-7; on her brothers Shen Zijin (1583-1665) and Shen Zizhen (1591-1641), see Zhou Shaoliang, ‘Wujiang Shenishi shijia’, Wenhua yanjiu congkan 12 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 48-59.
57 Shen Yixiu, Lichui, in WMF3, 1: 1-229, esp. 83.
58 Shen Yixiu, Lichui, 83.
60 Shen Yixiu, ‘Jin Qi Qingzhang zhuang’, in WMF3, 1: 201-204; For a translation of the biography, see Edema and Grant, Red Brush, p. 402.
61 On cultural capital (the term is taken to include forms of knowledge, skills, education, any advantages that give a person higher social status, high expectations
had experience in private publishing and her husband had learnt about official publishing when serving as an instructor at the National University in Beijing. Literati families would distribute privately published books among friends and family. Such works could establish the author’s literary reputation. This might in turn translate into success with the commercial publishers.

The Publishing Industry and the New Market

It is difficult to determine whether Shen Yixiu’s family profited from her publications but we do know that her works instantly turned into a commercial success. Commercial publishers reproduced her and her daughters’ highly marketable works as soon as they appeared in print. Reprints of *Yamou* appeared in separate volumes and within other anthologies even before the end of the Ming.

These publishers had begun to cater to a new market. As the urban population exploded in late Ming Jiangnan, women emerged as consumers, producers and subjects of literature in unprecedented numbers. Together with merchants, students, successful scholars and failed examination candidates they formed a new reading audience, creating demands for new kinds of books. Works by and about women enjoyed particular popularity.

The interests of anthologists and commercial publishers overlapped in the production and promotion of books. Scholars edited not only poetry collections but also an unprecedented number of collected works by individual women writers in the Ming/Qing era. Other literati followed the fashion by compiling writings about women. Handbooks on courtesans appeared from 1600, ranking the beauties of Suzhou and Nanjing and eulogising them in prose, verse and song. Their authors, editors and intended readers must have found such guidebooks useful and entertaining when they gathered in those cities to attend the triennial examinations. In late imperial China works on women guaranteed sales.

Evidence of the commercial interest in publishing, the focus on women as literary subjects, and the awareness of an emerging market of female readers had already appeared in the fifteenth century. In the middle of the Ming dynasty the publishing industry gradually shifted its centre from Fujian to the cities of Jiangnan, in particular Nanjing, Suzhou and Hangzhou. Individual enterprises and commercial bookstores, rather than the official channels, began to dominate the market. Technological advances and changes in the production mode such as the simplification of fonts and the division of labour in wood block cutting made publication faster and more economical. The Huizhou merchants readily supplied Jiangnan publishers with wood from Anhui province.

The state had cancelled its tax on books as early as 1368, yet books remained expensive and were not common in the days of the early Ming. By late Ming times, however, the revolution in publishing resulted in mass printing. During the Wanli period the state made further tax concessions for some trades, such as newspaper publishers, booksellers and stationers, considering their businesses insufficiently profitable to pay shop tax. The Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) marvelled at the circulation of books in China, noting “the exceedingly large number of books in circulation here and the ridiculously low prices at which they are sold.”

Popular stories and plays had a price tag of no more than 15 to 30 copper cash (qian) per volume; a copy of a novel would cost

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between 1 and 2 silver taels (liang). Prices would vary according to bookellers, regions and the rarity of editions. Modern scholars conjecture that sixty-five per cent of the male urban population in Jiangnan was literate and that forty per cent of them could afford to purchase works of fiction and drama.

To give an idea of what such book prices amounted to in real terms, here are some figures for comparison: according to a late Ming source from 1619, a labourer earned 24 to 25 cash (yen) in copper coins per day, hardly enough to keep him alive. The price of rice could vary from as little as 25 copper cash per peck (bua, ten catties, or 10.74 litres) in the mid-sixteenth century to one tael per picul (shi, 100 catties) after natural disasters in the early seventeenth century. A day worker’s average of 1.5 taels a month would not suffice to purchase warm clothes for his family in winter, let alone books.

The literati and merchants, however, would have considered book prices cheap. High-ranking officials earned an annual income of around 152 silver taels, and received gifts from provincial officials amounting to ten times as much. Lower-ranking officials might receive no more than 35 taels per annum and go into debt or find other, not always legal, sources of income. Late Ming documents inform us that women, too, had cash in hand and participated in the money economy just like men. Scholars, officials, merchants and their womenfolk thus emerge as the buyers and consumers of books.

Towards the mid-seventeenth century books became even cheaper. While the prices of food and necessities rose during the 1630s and 40s due to hoarding, poor harvests, and speculation, prices for other goods fell as inflation gave way to deflation. A copy of a household encyclopaedia (rijong leishu), an almanac containing a plethora of practical advice, cost one silver tael at the turn of the seventeenth century but only one qian of copper cash during the last Ming reign-period (1628-1644). Moreover, technical innovations in printing techniques, production and distribution further decreased the prices of books, making them more widely available.

The modern Japanese scholar Ōki Yasushi suggests that a mass communication society emerged in the late Ming era. Late Ming publishers and booksellers catered to a mass market: the growing urban population and unprecedented numbers of examination candidates, lower degree holders, failed students, upwardly mobile merchants and literate women. The book trade also tempted bibliophiles to indulge in their passion for amassing private collections. Privately owned libraries—similar to the one in the studio of the great scholar and editor Qian Qianyi and his wife Liu Rushi—could contain up to fifty thousand volumes (juan). The garden of scholar-official Qi Baojia (1602-1645) and his wife, the poetess Shang Jinglan (1601-ca. 1680), contained a multi-storied building that housed a collection of 31,500 volumes. Scholars competed in filling dozens of crates, or dozens of rooms with their books, listing them in multi-volume catalogues, and reissuing rare works in collectanea (tsugaha).

The passion for collecting books had two important consequences: first, it gave some women—the bibliophiles’ wives, concubines, daughters and sisters—access to grand libraries within their own homes. The libraries enabled them to indulge in literary pursuits for entertainment, study, or professional work. Second, commercial publishers began to make serious money. The owner of the Huanduzhai publishing house in Hangzhou, Wang Qi (ca. 1605-after 1668) watched in amazement.

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87 Wakeman, The Great Enterprise, p. 6.
88 Ōki Yasushi, "Shuppan bunka", 104.
89 Chang and Chang, China, p. 273.
91 Cf. Ōki Yasushi, "Shuppan bunka", 105; Brook, Confucians, p. 106.
94 Brook, Confucians, p. 160.
as his profit turned "his tadpole studio into a unicorn pavilion".\textsuperscript{102} Wang never passed any examinations but as a publisher he found himself in the position to offer employment to the highest degree holders.\textsuperscript{103} Wang An (1614-after 1694), a relative of Wang Qi’s who also worked in the family publishing business, professed to scholarly aspirations but withdrew from government service when the Ming dynasty fell. His life, occupation and circumstances remain obscure but he described himself as "filthy rich".\textsuperscript{104}

The seventeenth-century novel *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* (Marriage destinies that will bring society to its senses) by a writer with the pseudonym of Xizhou Sheng (Scholar of the Western Zhou) mocks the "poor scholar’s option of making money by opening a bookstore".\textsuperscript{105} Indeed many scholars followed the trend and gave up book learning to go into business (*qiru congshang*).\textsuperscript{106} Famous examples of seventeenth-century poets-turned-publishers include the artist and editor Chen Jiru (1558-1639) in Songjiang,\textsuperscript{107} the anthologist Feng Menglong (1574-1646) in Suzhou,\textsuperscript{108} and the dramatist Li Yu (1611-ca. 1680) who in 1669 set up his bookstore and printing house, the Mustard Seed Garden (*Jiezi yuan*), in Nanjing.\textsuperscript{109}

According to a recent estimate, seventeenth-century China boasted 374 major publishers. Suzhou had the largest share with 42 publishing houses while Hangzhou and Nanjing had 31 each.\textsuperscript{110} Li

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\textsuperscript{103} Widmer, “Huanduzhai”, 87.

\textsuperscript{104} Widmer, “Huanduzhai”, 91.


\textsuperscript{106} On this trend in seventeenth-century China, see Berg, *Carnival in China*, pp. 247-63.


\textsuperscript{108} On Feng as editor, see Ōki Yasushi, *Chōgaku Min Shin jidai no hango* (Tokyo: Hōso chigaku kyoiku shinkōkai 2001), 109-114.

\textsuperscript{109} Chen Jiru from Huating, Jiangsu province, never made it beyond the status of licentiate in his examination career, but he owned a great library and employed a number of poor scholars to assist him in editing a large anthology. On Chen, see Arthur Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period, 1644-1912* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943-44 [hereafter: *ECP*]), pp. 85-4.


Yu’s enterprise made money producing and selling not only his own writings but also works of popular fiction such as the *Shoubi zhuans*, *Xinyu ji* and *Jin Peng Mei*. Failed examination candidates, too, would seek their luck in the publishing industry, among them Yu Xiangdou (fl. 1599) from Jianyang (Fujian province) who advertised his business by including his portrait in his publications, guide-books to the kind of gentility he aspired to.\textsuperscript{111} Commercial interests also fuelled the publishers’ search for women’s writings to be included in anthologies.\textsuperscript{112}

Literati attitudes towards money and silver underwent change during the last decades of the Ming. The Roman Catholic Grand Secretary Xu Guangqi (1562-1633) from Shanghai declared in the 1620s that he perceived silver not as wealth but as a means for assessing wealth.\textsuperscript{113} In 1639—only a few years after ending his relationship with the courteous Liu Rushi—the poet, scholar and anthologist Chen Zilong confirmed his view that silver did not create wealth (in the way land did) but served to concentrate and direct resources.\textsuperscript{114} These Confucian scholars were, as Timothy Brook concludes, “acknowledging that silver was a fact of late-Ming life and indicating that they were comfortable with that fact.”\textsuperscript{115} At that time Chen Zilong had just composed a preface for Liu Rushi’s poetic collection *Wuyin cao* (Manuscript from the year 1638), helping his former lover to appear in print and perhaps earn money as well as fame.

Ye Shaoyuan’s voice evinces his awareness of the new trends and developments in the publishing industry. His preface (dated 1636) to his wife’s anthology explicitly targets a female audience:

May her sorrow be transmitted in carved characters, so that it will become known in this world and contribute to the genteel entertainment of young ladies and hence be carved onto the wooden printing blocks.\textsuperscript{116}

His comments imply that he was not entirely oblivious to the demands

\textsuperscript{111} Cf. Ko, *Teachers*, p. 40. For a detailed depiction, see Brook, *Confusions*, p. 213; picture reproduced on p. 215.

\textsuperscript{112} Cf. Ko, *Teachers*, p. 53.


\textsuperscript{114} See Chen Zilong’s preface, in Xu Guangqi, *Nongcheng qunshu*, 1: 1.


\textsuperscript{116} Ye Shaoyuan, “Yin si xiaoyin”, in *WMJ*, 1: 537.
of the marketplace, revealing him as an active participant in the exchanges and negotiations around the publication process and the book trade.

**Cultural Aspirations**

Editorship enables Shen Yixiu to enter the domain of *wen*, Confucian elite culture that remained the prerogative of men. Although she inverts traditional gender roles in taking on the role of editor, she complies with conservative values in the way she plays her role.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from the text as it stands today, but it is possible to think of several potential explanations. The first is that the text underscores her gentility by incorporating an exclusive selection strategy. It does not include any works by socially inferior or morally dubious women, implicitly endorsing Confucian concepts of morality and virtue and thereby the status quo.

Another possible explanation is that Shen Yixiu may simply not have included the works of women whom she did not know. She and her husband had a very close relationship and it is likely that they would have shared social and literary preferences. Ye differed from his more flamboyant, romantic late Ming contemporaries and after the fall of the Ming dynasty he chose an austere life style and became a monk. The couple may not have moved in circles that interacted with courtesans. Yet another factor to bear in mind is the incomplete state of the anthology. Shen Yixiu’s selection might have looked different, had she been able to complete the task in her lifetime.\(^{117}\)

Whatever her motives, Shen Yixiu’s selection strategy has the effect of elevating the position of the elite woman writer. She secures a place for herself, her female relatives and friends within the genteel culture of the (male) elite. Her anthology places the gentry poetess on the literary map and in the public consciousness of seventeenth-century Jiangnan. The fact that Shen Yixiu can afford to omit the courtesans’ works may serve as an indication that her quest for gentility outweighs any other material motivations.

By evoking the authority of the Grand Historian Sima Qian (ca. 145-86 BC) in the preface to her anthology, Shen Yixiu defines her role in literary history. She states that she seeks to follow his example by not discussing writings from the past or those that are widely available: “I would much rather talk about those affairs that have become dispersed and neglected.”\(^{118}\) Instead:

I venture to imitate his intent. Therefore I shall not again select works that feature in other anthologies of literary treasures. My husband spread the word about some obscure works and now everybody talks about them with general approval. Other works may already have enjoyed great popularity. As time passes, however, they have fallen into oblivion or met with unfavourable conditions that have hindered their transmission. This is truly regrettable. Now whenever I happened to hear about such splinters of jade, or came across them while randomly leafing through other books, I have included them in my anthology, and do not dare to discard anything! I have endeavoured to spare the time and effort for an extensive search in the hope that the results will show a splendid completeness.\(^{119}\)

She thus fashions the female self in the tradition of the Confucian scholar. Like the men around her, she strives for the ideals of literary pursuits and scholarly activity. Her female self-image is fashioned in response to male ideas about cultural aspirations and literary culture. In contrast to the male concept of gentility, the gentlewoman harbours no political aspirations in her literary pursuits. She positions herself in male literary culture by pursuing literary activities that express her personal history, social interests and cultural connections with other writing women.

For both men and women in late imperial China, editorship presented one way to acquire perceived gentility. The editorship of an anthology represented symbolic capital. The late Ming literatus Ge Zhengqi (fl. 1632) put a perceived value on his friend’s efforts to edit a book of women’s poetry: for an editor who tries to collect the works of women, so Ge mused, “discovering a slip of paper from hidden portfolios and incomplete editions of original books no longer extant is just like getting hold of a sliver of jade.”\(^{120}\) Zhong Xing’s anthologies of poetry proved so popular that “nearly everyone tried to have a copy in his home and treasured them as if they were revised by

\(^{117}\) I am indebted to Grace Fong for ideas expressed here.

\(^{118}\) Shen Yixiu, “Zixiu”, Williams, in *WMTJ*, 1: 538.

\(^{119}\) Ibid.

\(^{120}\) Ge Zhengqi, Preface to Jiang Yuanzuo, *Xu yuai wenyan*, in *FZQS*, 887-8.
Confucius himself."¹²¹ Late Ming minds pitched the perceived value of editorship high. As a woman, Shen Yixiu casts her self-image to comply with such values in a man's world.

Once the editor completed his/her anthology, the volume represented the equivalent of his/her lifetime savings. At that moment an editor found him/herself in the position to negotiate with the publishers and to turn his/her symbolic and cultural capital into monetary currency. This also applies to the prefaces that grace many edited volumes. Modern scholar Naifei Ding explains the function and importance of prefaces in her study of texts on the Jin Ping Mei:

Prefaces matter. Their matter is the stuff of literary capital (its accumulation, depletion, or exchange from the currency of nearby fields, such as the political or academic), just as it is the stuff of market salesmanship. Since the book markets of the late Ming Jiangnan region, prefaces have helped to ensure the place, price, and circulation of their books.¹²²

Such prefaces yield rare data on the discourse involved in such negotiations. Ellen Widmer has remarked that "no literary history is agenda-free", suggesting that "women's writings of the Ming and Qing were shaped to serve nonliterary goals".¹²³ These nonliterary goals as they emerge from our discussion divide into those that may be pronounced and those that may not: the former referring to name, fame and even the iconoclastic idea of establishing an alternative canon; the latter to money, profit and gain. Even in 1797 a woman editor still shied away from making the connection between the two. In the preface to her anthology of poetry Tungniawun guzhi tongren ji (Anthology of fellow women writers from the Listening-to-Autumn Studio, 1797), Luo Qilan (ca. 1756-after 1808) tells of her struggle as a widow to scrape a living for herself and her family by teaching and writing.¹²⁴ But she does not link her financial plight to her editorial mission statement:

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Hence I have compiled and edited the works of women writers and handed the manuscript over to the printers so that the broad masses will realize that the world does not lack talented women but the problem is that it has been twice as hard for them to have their works transmitted. People who do not take others seriously should not find it strange that there is not much evidence [of such writings]. I have edited this volume because my fate has not been as fortunate as that of others but I am lucky in that [my work] appears appealed to that of all the gentlemen.¹²⁵

Editorship moreover enables Shen Yixiu to create a literary community of women. She exchanges poetry with leading literary ladies whom she has never met and includes their works in her anthology.¹²⁶ She offers privately published copies of her own and her daughters' writings as tokens of friendship to other prominent women such as the painter and poetess Wu Shau and two poetesses from Jiaxing, Huang Yuanjie and Huang Dezhou (fl. seventeenth century), who later fall in her footsteps as editors of women's works.¹²⁷ As Dorothy Ko has noted in her pioneering study of women and culture in seventeenth-century China, the contents of Shen Yixiu's anthology "reflect both the centrality of women's culture in the lives of the authors and the editor's awareness of it."¹²⁸ A third of all poems in the anthology address other women while only a few are written for men.

Shen Yixiu's anthology also reaches out across time and space, inspiring and encouraging both her contemporaries and later generations of women writers. In 1639, only three years after the publication of her anthology, another elite lady followed suit: Wang Duanshu (1621-c. 1706) of Shaoxing took the concept of female editorship one step further by setting out to become a professional editor.¹²⁹ The notion of professional editor is here taken to mean

¹²⁵ FNZG 940.
¹²⁶ Such as Shen Renlan from Jiaxing, the wife of an Administration Vice Commissioner; see Shen Yixiu, Zizai, WWTJ 1: 555; Ko, Teachers, pp. 212-3.
¹²⁷ On Huang Dezhou (HZ Yuchun), see Zheng Guanzhi, Zengguo lidai zhaiyi, 1594-6; for a list of her works, see FNZG 665-6. Huang also became an editor, see below.
¹²⁸ Ko, Teachers, p. 215.
¹²⁹ On Wang Duanshu, see FNZG 246-50; WWTJ, pp. 363-6; Widmer, "Epistolary World", pp. 10-11; idem, "Xiaoqing's Literary Legacy", pp. 135-8; idem, "Ming Loyalty and the Women's Voice in Fiction after Hong lou meng", in Widmer and Chang, eds., Writing Women, pp. 306-73; Ko, Teachers, pp. 124-34; Chang,
that she worked closely with a team of collaborators and that she used her various literary activities to make a living. Her monumental anthology Mingqian shihua (The famous ladies' Apocryphal Book of Songs, published 1667) became a commercial enterprise and took twenty-five years to complete.130 Shen Yixiu had started a trend, and in the Qing dynasty women carried on compiling, editing and publishing literary anthologies.131 Many decades later, at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, a group of ten women from Shen Yixiu’s native Suzhou followed her enterprising literary spirit and formed the Clear Brook Poetry Club (Qingxi yinhe) whose members were also known as the Ten Poets of Suzhou (Wuzhong shi).132

The Courtesan Ghost-Editor

The story of another seventeenth-century woman shows that it was not only gentlewomen who became literary editors. Legend surrounds the life of the famous courtesan Liu Rushi—a friend of the gentlewoman and professional editor Wang Duanshu—who ranks among the most upwardly mobile women writers of seventeenth-century China. In her teens she gained fame as a poetess, painter


130 Wang Duanshu worked on the anthology from 1639 to 1664.

131 See Table 3. Huang Dezhen co-edited Mingqian shihua (Selection of poetry by famous gentlewomen) together with Gui Shufen (Zhou Suying), and Shen Hui (Zhou Fan); Gui Shufen also co-edited another anthology of twenty-six and forty-five Qing authors Gaojin mingqian bahu shihua (One hundred flowers of poetry by famous ladies of past and present) (1685) together with Sun Huiyan (Zhou Jingshan, the daughter of Huang Dezhen), Shen Li (Zhou Xunzheng) and Sheng Zhenyong (Zhou Qingshan); cf. FANG, 784. Wang Duan (1793-1838) edited Mingqian jia shihua (Selected poems of thirty Ming poets, 1822), a collection of writings by male authors only; Wanquy Yang Zhu (1771-1833) edited Gaojin guaixi zhangji (Correct beginnings: poems by gentlewomen of our dynasty, 1831), a collection of over 1500 Qing poetesses.


Table 3. Women Editors’ Anthologies from the Late Ming to the Mid-Qing Era

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Editor(s)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1636</td>
<td>Shen Yixiu’s (1590-1635) Tianzhong (Longing for one far away) is published posthumously</td>
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<tr>
<td>mid 17th C</td>
<td>Fang Wei (1585-1668) edits the anthologies Gaojin shihua (History of poetry in palace and boudoir) and Gaojin tianzhong (History of prose writing in palace and boudoir); published before 1652 (exact publication dates are unknown)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mid 17th C</td>
<td>Wang Wei (ca. 1600-47) edits anthology of travelogues Mingqian ji (Records of famous mountains); published before 1652 (exact publication dates are unknown)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1652</td>
<td>Qian Qianyi publishes Liezhai shihua (Collection of poetry from successive reigns); Liu Rushi (1618-1664) involved in editing Ranyi (Intercalary collection) section from 1646-49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1667</td>
<td>Wang Duanshu (1621-ca. 1706) publishes Mingqian shihua (The famous ladies’ apocryphal Book of Odes) after twenty-five years of editorial work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>late 17th C</td>
<td>Huang Dezhen, Gui Shufen and Shen Hui co-edit Mingqian shihua (Selection of poetry by famous gentlewomen)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1685</td>
<td>Gui Shufen, Sun Huiyan (Huang Dezhen’s daughter), Shen Li and Zhang Zhenyong co-edit Gaojin mingqian bahu shihua (One hundred flowers of poetry by famous ladies of past and present)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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[Source: FANG, Fong, “Gender”; Ko, Teacher, WUTC]

and calligrapher. By the age of twenty-two she had already published several volumes of her poetry and married into the highest echelons of the elite.133

Following in the footsteps of Shen Yixiu and Wang Duanshu, she, too, edited women’s poetry. Unlike these elite ladies, however, her name never appeared on the title page of the first anthology she helped compile, edit, and annotate. She also composed the literary biographies that are appended to the anthology. It took around three hundred years for her involvement in this work to be recognized and for her to be acknowledged as an author and editor.134 As a

133 Her early poetry collections include Wuqiu san (Manuscript from the year 1638) Wumenzi yuangong lousi (Songs from the Chamber of Mandarin Ducks by Wowsers), and Hu yangce (Poems drafted by the lake, 1640). For a list of Liu Rushi’s publications, see FANG, 430-4.

134 FANG, 433; Chang, “Ming and Qing Anthologies”, pp. 153-6. A second
ghost-writer—or perhaps rather a 'ghost editor'—operating from behind the scenes, she yet again rewrote literary history, redefining the writing woman's identity. The term ghost-writer here is taken to mean a "person who does creative or artistic work on behalf of another person who takes the credit". As this concept was also known in late imperial China, it is appropriate to describe the circumstances in which Liu Rushi contributed to a major literary anthology.

Like Shen Yixiu and other women editors, gentle or otherwise, Liu Rushi could become an editor—a position requiring publishing resources and exercising power—mainly through the men around her. In Shen Yixiu's case, as mentioned before, her relatives and her husband had experience in publishing by virtue of their scholarly status and official careers. Liu Rushi, as we shall see, had access to similar resources by virtue of her connections with her lovers from literati and merchant circles, and in particular her husband, one of the most eminent scholar-officials of his time.

The Courtesan's Quest

Liu Rushi's life has received ample documentation. The following brief biographical sketch outlines her editorial activities within the cultural context, retraction the network of social, literary and

anthology of women's poetry edited by Liu Rushi, entitled Gaiji mingjuan shici xuan (Selection of poems and song-lyrics from famous ladies ancient and modern) did not appear until 1937 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju), almost three centuries after her lifetime (FNCZ, 434; see also the discussion below).


The Chinese term for ghost-writer zhandao ren appears, for example, in the story "Zhang Hongqian", in Po Songlong, Lianzhai chinl haozhao baozheng ben, ed. Zhang Youhe (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1976), 9.1227.

financial negotiations that surrounds her work.

Born in either Jiaxing or Wujiang in Jiangsu province, she spent her childhood as a maid servant to a famous courtesan in the pleasure quarters of Gujiuyuan in Shengze. Before she became a concubine in the household of the retired grand secretary Zhou Daodeng (d. 1633) in Wujiang—the native town of Shen Yixiu. The old minister educated her in literature and the arts, but sold her to a brothel in Shengze in 1631 when his other concubines implicated the teenager in a sex scandal. In the early 1630s, at the time when Shen Yixiu was compiling her gentlewomen's anthology, Liu Rushi trained and worked as an entertainer in the brothels of Suzhou and Songjiang and also visited Jiading. She was moving in the circles of China's intellectual elite.

She was only fifteen when she began a love affair with the young poet Chen Zilong (1608-1647, jinshi 1637) in 1633, became his regular paramour and shared his lodgings. Chen became her soul-mate and intellectual companion but his wife eventually enforced their separation. In 1635 Liu Rushi left Songjiang for a courtesan house in Wujiang—returning to the town in which Shen Yixiu died that year. 

Liu Rushi acquired the status of a mingzi (literally, famous prostitute) or courtesan, one of the highly trained, specialised performers, artists and entertainers who were literate and skilled in a variety of entertainment arts, and their services were not confined to the sale of sex, in contrast to the ordinary jinzi (prostitutes). The late imperial Chinese courtesan participated in and belonged to the world of letters (wenren), the domain of China's elite men. She was not only a woman who was being written about but also a writing woman herself: in late Ming times courtesans appeared at the centre of elite culture,

featuring in literature, drama, and poetry while also gaining fame as poetsesses, calligraphers and painters. Famous courtesans formed intellectual companionships with elite men, sharing their interest in scholarship and working with them in their studios composing poetry, compiling, collating, editing, proofreading and annotating literary writings. Courtesans of outstanding literary talent would also acquire the semi-honorable title of 'collator' or 'book reviser' (jianzhai).

In contrast to gentry women, courtesans were able to own property in their own right, although “this may have been something of a legal grey area”, as Alison Hardie points out. Some courtesans did invest their savings in town mansions, country villas and gardens. They used these to entertain elite men, often with a view to making a good match in marriage before their fame declined or old age put an end to their careers.

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182 LRSBG, 68, 105-6, 121, 328. Liu had a sister who also became a courtesan
183 LRSBG, 471.
184 For an excellent analysis of the relationship and love poetry of Chen and Liu, see Chang, Late-Ming Poet, pp. 40-80.
186 Courtesans who feature in literary works include: Li Xiangjun in Kong Shangren's (1648-1718) play Toshannah (The peach blossom fan, 1695); Liu Tianan in Li Yu’s (1611-ca. 1680) Tichang yuany (Ideal love-matches, preface 1659); Chen Yuanfan (1622-1656), Bian Sai (z: Vufing, fl. early seventeenth century) and Dong Xiaowen (z: Bai, 1625-1651) in Wu Weiyi’s (1609-1711) poems; Dong Xiaowen and Chen Yuanfan in Mao Xiang’s (1611-1633) Yueqin su yin (Memoirs of the Plum Shadows Studio); Bian Sai, Ma Shouzheng (z: Xianglan, 1548-1604), Gu Mei (alias Xu Mei, z: Meiheng, 1619-64), Kong Baiwen and other courtesans of the Qunhui pleasure quarters in Yu Huan’s (1616-96) Baojia zaji (Miscellaneous records of the Wooden Bridge); Niu Baiwen in a poem by Qiao Qianyi; Liu Rushi in Chen Zilong’s and Qiao Qianyi’s poetry on Mao Xiang and the late Ming literary, see Oki Yasushi, “Senso inmem: Hokoyoken to Budo”, Nihon Chigusa gakubu 55, 2003: 166-80.
188 “Jinzi was first used for the Tang dynasty courtesan Xue Tuo (768-831); the late Ming courtesan Xue Suss used the term for herself. Liu Rushi was also referred to as such by other literati (see LRSBG, 188) and addressed in this way by other women (e.g. Li Yin’s “Two Poems for Lady Collator Liu Rushi”, see Li Yin, Qianmain wen ju ren, 1643 (copy in Ges Library, Princeton University), 1.14; for a translation, see WWTC, 371.
189 Alison Hardie, “Washing the Writing Tree: Garden Culture as an Expression of Women’s Gentility in the Late Ming”, in Daria Berg and Chilee Stark, eds., The Quest for Gentility in China: Negotiations beyond Gender and Class (forthcoming).
190 E.g. the town mansion of Li Xiangjun (alias Li Shunian, or Tenly Lady),
In the late 1630s Liu Rushi spent much time travelling around the Yangzi delta region. She visited Hangzhou and the West Lake with a new mentor and lover, the elderly Wang Ranning (1577-1655). Wang Ranning, a wealthy and well-connected salt merchant originally from Huizhou (Xin’an) had made his name as a poet, playwright and patron of the arts, gaining fame for the lavish parties on his flower boat on the West Lake. He entertained leading literati like Chen Jiru, Dong Qichang (1555-1635) and Li Yu and introduced famous courtesans and professional female artists to each other. Here Liu Rushi came into contact with friends of Shen Yixiu and Wang Dunshu, such as Huang Yunjie and Wu Shan, and other famous courtesans including Lin Tianmu (fl. 1620-1642) from Fujian, and Wang Wei (ca. 1600-1647) from Guangling (Yangzhou), both accomplished painters and poets.

After three years Wang Ranning began to withdraw from his relationship with Liu Rushi, but he also introduced the twenty-two-year-old to another potential mentor, the scholar and statesman Qian Qianyi, thirty-six years her senior. In the autumn of 1640

the courtesan, dressed as a male scholar, visited Qian to show him her poetry. After the fashion of famous courtesans, she proposed to him and within a month moved into his house. On 14 July 1641 Qian married her with all the pomp and ceremony due to a principal wife, although his first wife was still alive. Liu Rushi gave birth to their daughter in 1649 and remained at his side until his death on 17 June 1664.

Shortly after Qian Qianyi died, his clan stripped her of her estate, jewellery and servants and demanded three thousand silver taels in cash. Three thousand silver taels counted as a large sum. A man paid this amount to ransom a prize-winning courtesan from Qinhuai in 1639. During the last years of the Ming a courtesan’s grand mansion, bought by her as a life-time investment, sold for three thousand taels. Liu Rushi tried in vain to appease her husband’s relatives with a bribe of one thousand taels. Unable to withstand the pressure, she committed suicide during a banquet at her house on 21 July 1664 in order to secure the future of her child.

Her final act may point to a deep-seated depression but it also highlights the ambiguity of her social status. Unable to shed her reputation as a courtesan, she remained in a precarious position on the fringe of the elite. Fame and success offered no escape. Even the existence of a male heir and formal son—Qian’s son by his first wife—could not save her.

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131 On Wang Ranning (æœæœ€) and Liu Rushi, see Widmer, “Episcopalian World”, pp. 13-14.

132 His most famous boat was called Best yuan (The untied garden), cf. LRSRQ, 373-8. The name suggests its pretensions to the aura of the famous literati gardens used for social gatherings and poetry parties. On late Ming gardens, see Craig Clunas, Painted Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), pp. 138-9; Hardie, “Washing the Wuxing Tree”.

133 On Chen Jiru, see Oki Yasushi, “Yamabito Chin Keju”, ECPP, pp. 83-4; On Dong Qichang, see ECPP, pp. 787-9; On Li Yu, see Patrick Hanan, The Invention of Li Yu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Chang and Chang, Crisis.

134 On Wang Wei (æœæœ€), see Qian Qianyi, Luchun shijia xianghu (Shanghai: Guidian wenxue chubanshe, 1957), pp. 760-1; FQNZ, 88-90, WYTC, pp. 320-9. Liu Tianmu’s style name is Xue. On Liu Rushi’s friendship and artistic teamwork with other courtesans, such as Gu Mei, see the immensely interesting discussion of Gu Mei’s painting of orchids alongside Liu Rushi’s accompanying poems by Oki Yasushi, “Shihoku yori yu jin to Ryo Joshi—Ciakaido bijutsukan 60 ‘Ko Bi ga Ryo Joshi shoo gokki satou ni yonete’”, Ciakaido bijutsukan tenkai kyo 3, 2002: 1-18.

135 Qian had risen to the ranks of chief supervisor of instruction, junior vice-president of the Board of Rites, and a reader in the Hanlin Academy, on Qian, see Oki Yasushi, “Shihoku yori yu jin”, 10, ECPP, pp. 148-50. For an exquisite study of Qian’s literary activities in 1640, see Oki Yasushi, “Ko bofu shokai: Minamata Shincho Kusan bunjin tembyo”, Tihokag 99, 2000: 33-46.

136 Qian’s first wife Ms Chen died in 1658; cf. LRSRQ, 35.

137 On the relationship between Liu and her daughter, see Pingchen Hsiung, "Female Gentility in Transition and Transmission: Mother-Daughter Ties in Ming-Ching China", in Berg and Starr, eds., The Quest for Gentility in China (forthcoming).


139 See Yu Huai, Ruobao caiyi, 35-6.

Liu Rushi's precarious position on the fringe of the elite also shows in her standing as a poetess and writer. As Ellen Widmer notes, "very famous artists and writers like Liu Shi [Rushi] were actually sought out by publishers, and their works commanded a good price." It was probably due to Liu's celebrity status that the editors of the three major anthologies of literati letters known as Chida xinyu (chubian; erbian; guangbian) (Modern letters: First collection, 1663; Second collection, 1667; Enlarged collection, 1668), a commercial publishing enterprise, chose to include two of her pieces among entries by elite women. Even so, the three male editors—a highest degree holder, a dramatist, and Wang Ranning's nephew, the Huizhou merchant and publisher Wang Qi—would include Liu only under the obscure pseudonym Qingqi, which did not threaten to reveal her identity.

The Name as a Mask

Liu Rushi had many names. She changed them according to the stages in her life, imitating the literati predilection for sobriquets while reinventing her past and personality. Although it was commonplace to have multiple names, her name changes occurred more frequently than she would normally be the case. As a child she was known as Yang Junjuan (Cloud Beauty). Upon entering brothel life she called herself Yinglian (Pining My Reflected Image)—expressing her sympathy for the tragic figure of Xiaoqin who was obsessed with her shadow. As a teenager she adopted the name Yang Ai (Love)—probably an allusion to the semi-legendary Northern Song dynasty courtesan Yang Ai from Qiantang whose story had popular currency in late Ming times.

After her split from Chen Zilong she took the unusual step of changing her surname and styled herself Liu Yin (Liu the Recluse). Liu claimed in a letter to a friend: "What I want most is to find a quiet place and withdraw into reclusion." Dorothy Ko has drawn attention to the paradox of a number of seventeenth-century courtesans and professional artists choosing the character yin (hidden, obscure) for their name, an act that seems to negate the life-style of "the very women who hid neither their presence, their works, nor their name from public view." The name effects irony.

Far from its literal meaning of resignation or retreat, yin was turned on its head and made into an affirmation of these women's acclaimed talents. ... Through a parody of the didactic: [Lesmi zhuo] Biographies of Exemplary Women, they were celebrating their education and literary talents.

Tie also puts on the female principle yin—as opposed to yang, the male principle. Liu and her contemporaries made a point of identifying themselves as China's hidden talent, the women of letters who would never have public careers but who began to emerge in the public eye as writers, poets and teachers.

Solitude, reclusion and the motif of hiding also feature as powerful and frequently recurring images in Liu Rushi's poetry and prose. She inscribed one of her paintings with these words:

Solitude generates poetry,
[The choice between] breath and death depends on subdety and awareness
Finding le mot juste requires real talent,
When I am no longer there to hum my verses will anyone still treasure them?

The secluded path is hidden under moss.

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165 The other editors were the jushi degree holder, member of the Fu She and Ming loyalist Huang Zhouzen (1611-80) and the dramatist Xu Shijin (1602-81). For an excellent discussion of these collections, see Widner, "Epistolary World", 163.
166 See LRB, 28-37; Ko, Teachers, pp. 274-8.
168 LRB, 43.
169 On yin, see LRB, 34-6, 354; Ko, Teachers, p. 277; Wai-yei Li, "The Late Ming Courtesan," pp. 55-7.
170 Fifth letter to Wan Ranning; LRB, 384.
171 Ko, Teachers, p. 277; Other women writers who did so were Huang Yuanji who chose the name Li Yin, and Zhang Wanxiao (fl. mid-seventeenth century), the daughter-in-law of Shang Jinglan, who chose Xiaying; cf. LRB, 34.
172 See Liu Xiang, Xianfan gu lesi zhuo, (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), p. 47.
173 Ko, Teachers, p. 277.
175 An allusion to a story about Jia Dao (779-843) who asked Han Yu (768-824) which word bai (to push), or qiao (to knock) to use in one of his poems.
176 Calligraphy on Liu Rushi's paintings reprinted in Widner et al., Views from Jade Terrace, p. 226.
Another inscription reads:

Page after page of deep sadness,
Time creeps like a shadow inch by inch,
Gloomy clouds obliterate the sky,
I no longer care about writing poetry.\textsuperscript{178}

In a letter to her lover Wang Ranning she lamented her broken heart when she found herself waiting for him in vain:

Only when I came to the shores of the lake, I learned that you were still held up in your hometown. ... I had not thought that upon returning to the mountains, I would be tormented by my previous painful feelings, leaving me in the doldrums until today. I heard recently that you have already returned—what good fortune—so I am writing this note. The mountains are one of the most beautiful places to behold, but apart from a stove for medicinal herbs and a mattress for meditation, there is nothing but the wind in the pine trees and the cassia bark tree on an islet. ... Reclining on a cushion made of grass—I just don't understand.\textsuperscript{179}

In the late 1630s Liu adopted the personal name Shi and the style names Rushi and Wonen jushi ('I Have Heard Recline'; both names allude to openings lines in Buddhist sutras).\textsuperscript{180} She stopped changing names after marriage but her husband gave her one more sobriquet, Hedong jun (Lord of the East of the River). Her predilection for dressing in literati robes also earned her the nickname 'Confucian gentleman (rushi), a pun on Rushi.\textsuperscript{181} This name epitomises her life and career: it conceals her identity, inverts gender roles and reveals her talent. As the pun suggests, she succeeded in making the step from entertainer and artist to female scholar in the perception of her contemporaries.

The Intercalary Collection

Liu Rushi acquired her scholarly reputation when she ceased to be merely a poetess and became an editor too. Liu was to stay at her illustrious husband's side for twenty-four years. Already during the first few years of their marriage they embarked together on a major scholarly enterprise. In 1643, three years after they had met, Qian Qianyi built for his new wife a studio and library for their great collection of rare books, the Jiayun lou (Crimson Gauze Cloud Pavilion) at the foot of the Yu mountains near Changshu. Its name alludes to both Liu's original name Yunjian and a fourth-century female scholar who lectured to imperial students from behind a crimson gauze curtain.\textsuperscript{182}

From 1646 to 1649 Liu Rushi assisted her husband in editing an extensive anthology of Ming poetry, the Liehao shiiji (Collection of poetry from successive reigns) and in compiling an appendix of about two thousand biographies (Liehao shiiji xiaozhuan).\textsuperscript{183} The anthology appeared in print under Qian Qianyi's name around the year 1652.\textsuperscript{184} Modern scholarship has only recently credited Liu Rushi with the editorship of the section on female writers Runji (Intercalary collection) in the fourth juan (volume) of Qian's Liehao shiiji and as the author of the appended biographies of women writers and critical appraisal of their works.\textsuperscript{185} In her study of Ming and Qing anthologies Kang-i Sun Chang first admits that she has been "unable to verify" this theory which she traces back to Hu Wenkai.\textsuperscript{186} She acknowledges in a footnote that Qian Qianyi wrote at least some of the biographical notes in this section, but finally concludes, "I shall simply assume that Liu Shi was the main editor of this section."\textsuperscript{187}

But can we take it as given? The attribution appears to be based on the following two items: first, Hu Wenkai's citation of a source, stating that Liu Rushi 'collated' (kanding) the women writers' part of the Runji.\textsuperscript{188} However kanding could also mean that she 'read and corrected the text'. And second, her own words in the

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{179} LRSB\textsuperscript{z}, 458.
\textsuperscript{180} "I heard it said" (rushi women); wrongly stated in ECCP, p. 149; cf. Ko, Teachers, p. 236, n. 77; Chang, Late-Ming Pot, p. 19; LRSB\textsuperscript{z}, 17-57.
\textsuperscript{181} Ko, Teachers, p. 278.
\textsuperscript{182} A fire destroyed both the studio and a large part of the library in 1650; cf. ECCP, p. 580.
\textsuperscript{183} On the dating, see the foreword by the Shanghai Gujian wenxue chuubanshe publishing committee in Qian Qianyi, Liehao shiiji xiaozhuan, 1.
\textsuperscript{184} It was printed by Qian Qianyi's pupil, the licentiate Mao Jin (1599-1659) who set up a printing business; on Mao Jin, see ECCP, pp. 565-6.
\textsuperscript{186} Chang, "Ming and Qing Anthologies", p. 153.
\textsuperscript{187} Chang, "Ming and Qing Anthologies", p. 153.
\textsuperscript{188} F\textsuperscript{zz}, 453.
Ruyi, here translated as Yu-Shih Chen:

My husband asked me to collate and edit (choujian) 'poems from the scented Trouseau'. Whenever something caught my attention, I added a collation note.\(^{189}\)

The Chinese term choujian however should be rendered as 'proofread' or 'copedicit', rather than 'select' or 'compile'. Would Qian Qianyi not have acknowledged in his preface Liu Rushi's role in the anthology if he had appointed her as the main editor of the section on women poets? Not necessarily, because the monumental anthology was his project and the Ruyi was but one part of it. Moreover teamwork was accepted practice for literary, editorial and scholarly enterprises. After all, Liu Rushi's name is not entirely effaced from his work; it does appear, identifying her as the author of the comments on the Korean poetess Xu Jingfan (Hô Kyôngbôn) (1563-1589) in the appended biographical notes. It is conceivable that Qian wrote the opening paragraph and the closing lines to the entry on Xu while Liu composed the interpolated commentary beginning with the phrase, "Liu Rushi said."\(^{190}\)

We may conclude that Liu Rushi certainly became involved in the production of the anthology. The exact scope and limits of her involvement, however, remain difficult to ascertain. We only know for certain that seventeenth-century women of Liu's calibre did compile and edit anthologies and also that teamwork was common practice in such enterprises, as the examples of Wang Duanshu and other editors show.\(^{191}\)

The anthology had a considerable impact on the literary scene. Seventeenth-century readers took the section on women writers seriously.\(^{192}\) Qian Qianyi's (and Liu Rushi's) Ming loyalist attitudes, however, gave later Qing dynasty scholars cause for concern. The

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189 Liu-shih xiangchuan, 814; translated by Yu-Shih Chen, in WWTC, 700.
190 For the ideas expressed here I am indebted to Allan Barr.
191 On the editorial activities of Wang Duanshu, Huang Dezhen, Gui Shufen and others, see above. Liu Rushi must have been aware of other women scholars and editors, too. For example, she criticises Lady Fang of Tongcheng's history of poetry; BNZ, 433.
192 As it claimed to have solved the mystery of the legendary poetess Xiaoqing, identifying her as a fictional heroine whose name puns on Miss Emotion (jing), one scholar Shi Yushan (1618-83) even launched an investigation; see Chen Wenshu, comp., Luyin ji, 1881, repr. as Xin anhsii chuian (Hangzhou: Liyiu shuju, 1929), pp. 8-9.
194 Qian Qianyi, Liu-shih xiangchuan, pp. 760-1.
195 As in the anthology Mingshi xuan (1785) by Zhu Yizun (1629-1709), which received Ji Yun's praise. On Ji Yun, see ECCP, pp. 129-3; on Zhu Yizun, see ECCP, pp. 182-5.
197 Huang Ming jingshi xuanbian, in 508 juan (printed 1639); Ningsheng quanshu (46 juan) and Ningsheng shu (13 juan).
198 Qian Qianyi, Liu-shih xiangchuan, pp. 760-1.
"Daoist Master in a Straw Coat" (Caoyi daoren) resembles that of Liu Rushi in many respects. The *Rugzi* provides the source for her biographical data. Orphaned as a child, Wang Wei, too, joined a brothel, became a famous courtesan, frequented the circle of Wang Rannmg, married a Ming loyalist scholar, turned towards Buddhism and gained a reputation as a "lady scholar" (*niishi*, literally female historian).199 She cruised the Yangzi delta and journeyed as far as Hunan in a boat that also carried her library.200 She confessed that she was addicted to travelling. Her travels spelt both agony and ecstasy:

A boat sails through the endless void...
The traveller delves deep into a far-away dream at night
Will anyone ever remember the traces of my solitary path?201

In the expanses of mist, how dismal, the lonely fishing boat.202

Wang Wei’s words resonate with Liu Rushi’s obsession with the woman writer’s solitude and the immortality of her literary output. In writing and editing these women may have found comfort and company, the realization of their dreams and the way to leave an imprint on history.202 Wang Wei’s anthology of travelogues possibly also constituted a commercial venture that catered to the late Ming travel boom and the demand for travel guides and travel diaries.203 The volume contains her preface but modern scholarship has found it difficult to ascertain her role in its production.204 In any case the attribution in itself shows how in the perception of her contemporaries editorship and reputation went hand in hand.

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199 Chen Jiu addressed Wang Wei with the honorific ‘Wei Daoren’ (Daoist Adept Wei); see *LSB2* 431-2; the courtesan Liu Tiantu refers to Wang Wei as lady-scholar in a letter, see *LSB2* 368-70. Wang Rannmg referred to all courtesans as nish (and girls for elite poets); cf. Ko, "Written Word", p. 436, n.15.
200 It has been suggested that both Wang Wei and Liu Rushi were ‘boat courtesans’ (shuangzi) in floating establishments; see Zhou Caixian, *Liu Rushi zalan* (Huaqiyin: Jiangsu guji chuabanshe, 1986), pp. 14-22. Liu Rushi once borrowed a boat from Wang Rannmg; cf. *LSB2*, 375.
202 Like Shen Yixiu, Wang Wei alludes to the image of yin (that man) in her preface to her poetry collection *Wangzi pian* (As if I were there); *FZ2* 88.
203 On the travel boom and travel diaries, see Berg, *Carnival in China*, pp. 22-3.
204 Ko, *Teachers*, p. 286.

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Seventeenth-century perceptions of the courtesan-poetess Li Yin (1616-1685) from the Hangzhou area illustrate the power of editorship from yet another angle. Li Yin became the concubine of the Ming loyalist poet Ge Zhenggi (d. 1645).205 She, Liu Rushi and Wang Wei became known together as a trio of "exceptionally famous courtesans".206 All three married literati but Li Yin’s name appears in literary anthologies under the heading of virtuous wives, rather than in the section of courtesan poetesses. In the eyes of both her contemporaries and later generations she had shed her courtesan origins. Wang Duanshu’s anthology, for example, for no apparent reasons classifies Li Yin, but not the other two, under a more respectable category.207 The nineteenth-century anthology edited by the eminent lady scholar Wanyan Yun Zha (1771-1833) does likewise and even some modern scholarly works ignore her origins. Li Yin’s case shows the ambiguity of the courtesan’s social position and the potential for promotion in the cultural milieu.208

Poetry and publishing, as noted above, were important for a gentleman as he could show off his talent, learning and gentility, making them both visible and public. Scholarship, the prerequisite for success in the civil service examinations, would pave a gentleman’s way up the social ladder of success, giving him access to the ranks of the elite. In the case of a woman, a public and political career was out of the question, but the example of Shen Yixiu has shown how an elite woman used poetry and publishing as a means to increase her social network and reach out to other like-minded women of her class who shared some aspects of her life experience and whose trials and tribulations resembled those of her own family. A published volume of poetry would potentially entail visibility, fame and immortality for its authors and editor, be they male or female. For a gentlewoman, it would be one way of marking her intellectual standing among members of the ruling class. For a courtesan, however, it could be
one way of displaying her literary talents, catching the attention of ruling-class men, enthralled by her lovers and ultimately gaining entry to the ranks of the elite by means of marriage to a scholar-official.

Chen Zilong encouraged Liu Rushi to have her poems published. In his preface to her collection *Wayin cai* (Manuscript from the year 1638) he praises the gentleness and elegance (yueya) of her poetry: "Now, as to the poetry by Master Liu, how it aspires to purity, how focused and far-sighted it is, how magnificent and grand in scope, how subtle and unrestrained." In a euphemistic reference to her background, Chen also effaces her courtesan origins. From Chen's point of view she stars as a poet and scholar, meriting the honorific 'Master Liu' (Liu zi). Her literary success makes her—almost—an honorary member of the literati.

Liu Rushi occupies a special place among the many talented and famous courtesan poetrists of the Ming/Qing era for being the only one known to have become an editor.编辑 abandoned her power to manipulate contemporary perceptions of (her) gentility. Apart from the *Runji*, she also compiled an anthology entitled *Gujin mingyan shici xuan* (Selected Works of *shi* and *ci* poetry by women from ancient times to the Ming), which remained unpublished until 1937, when it appeared in an edition produced by Zhongxi shuju in Shanghai. By virtue of editing women's poetry Liu Rushi inscribed herself and the other courtesan poets into history. She not only selected the entries for her husband's anthology but also composed—or helped compose—the biographies of the women authors included in the *Runji*. Even if only as her husband's 'ghost', she left her mark on the literary world of her time.

The Editor's Agenda

Liu Rushi knew how to make use of the power of editorship. In the *Runji* she resorts to an unprecedented selection strategy. Her organizing principle disregards social criteria, and works by elite ladies and courtesans appear under the same category. In this way Liu removes moral distinctions and social barriers from her poetic world. She edits her literary world to her preferences. The eclecticism of the collection reflects the wide circle of her social contacts, including other courtesans, among them Wang Wei, Lin Tiansu and Xue Susu (fl. 1575-1635), and also gentrladies such as Huang Yuanjie, Wu Shan and her daughter.

In this sense Liu Rushi’s selection appears as radically different from that of Shen Yixiu, but it conforms generally to the trend displayed in male anthologists’ collections. Alternatively, it could reflect the choice her husband would have made. A male editor would typically select women writers for inclusion according to perceived literary merit, rather than social status. He would freely intermingle poems by elite ladies and courtesans. For example, Zhong Xing’s anthology *Mingyan shuji* celebrates the works of courtesans and in particular Wang Wei, the only courtesan and one of the few authors to occupy an entire chapter. The gentrladies in such anthologies were in many cases the wives, sisters and daughters of the scholars who edited such works. But these editors were also the men who frequented the pleasure quarters and became the companions and lovers of the courtesans who featured in their literary collections. Zhong Xing had an affair with Wang Wei, who would entertain him on her boat. Infatuated with his new ex-courtesan wife, Qian Qianyi might have been similarly inclined in his selection of women poets for his anthology. In the case of Qian Qianyi and Liu Rushi’s *Runji* it is difficult to determine whether the selection was his or her choice. Even if it was her choice, it might well reflect his predilections, as well as hers.

The inclusions are not value-free however. The *Runji* places the emphasis firmly on the courtesans’ works, giving them pride of place at the expense of the gentrladies. Liu Rushi moreover stresses the

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209 *FNZ*, 430-1.
210 *LRS*, 112.
211 Ibid. Chen uses qingou (blue chamber), a clever allusion to the women's inner chambers, instead of qingtou (blue tower), i.e. the pleasure quarters.
215 Cf. *WFTC*, p. 320. Wang Wei also features prominently in Zhou Zhennailing’s anthology *Ni zhuo qi caizi lu* (Orchid babblings by seven talented poets) from the mid-seventeenth century.
romantic tradition in poetry, favouring works written in courtesan style over those by major and established writers. Her anthology thus elevates and glorifies courtesan poetry.

In the biographies and literary appraisals appended to the Ruji Liu Rushi has no qualms about voicing criticism. She finds fault with the history of poetry compiled by one of the other seventeenth-century woman editors Fang Weiyi and her evaluation of late Ming women writers:

Lady Fang of Tongcheng has compiled and edited a history of poetry. In her critique of Xu Yuan’s poetry, she condemns all women writers from the Wu [Suzhou] region with one single expression: ‘They’re fishing for fame, but lacking in learning.’ Yet she launches into a rambling discourse on Xu’s poems. I utterly fail to see why she did it.216

In the role of editor Liu Rushi positions herself at the very heart of literati culture, collecting, commenting and criticising, but she also plays safe. She includes only two poems by the famous Xu Yuan (1560-1620), a gentry poet long dead by the time Liu Rushi pens her critique in the first years of the Qing dynasty.217 Another target of her criticism, the Korean poetess Xu Jingshan, also lived in the previous century; moreover, from Liu Rushi’s point of view, her foreign status makes her role in Chinese literary history marginal.218

In her comparative literary study of Liu Rushi and the elite woman poet Xu Can (ca. 1610-after 1677) from Changzhou (modern Suzhou), modern scholar Kang-i Sun Chang has shown that the courtesan remains more timid and conservative in her choice of style, rhetoric, genre and theme than the gentry lady.219 For the courtesan, more is at stake. Liu, the ex-courtesan, chooses her words with care, yet resorts to radical means in pursuing her agenda and promoting the literary talents of the courtesan—at the expense of the gentlewoman writer.

216 Qian Qianyi, Luehao shiji xiaozhan, 813-4.
217 Xu Yuan was unconventional among gentry ladies in pursuing intimate friendships with courtesans, such as Xue Xian; see Ko, Teachers, pp. 260-74.
218 Qian Qianyi, Luehao shiji xiaozhan, 813-4; on Xu Yuan, see WWCTC, pp. 209-15.

Copper, Silver and the Gilded Life

Ellen Widmer has pointed out that for courtesans, high achievement in literature and the arts “could lead in the desirable direction of marriage with gentry men”;220 but there must have been other goals, too. Many courtesans continued their literary and artistic pursuits or embarked on such tasks after marriage into the elite. Liu Rushi became an editor only after marrying a scholar-official. Scholarship turned into a vehicle for entering the charmed circle of the intellectual elite, consolidating one’s reputation and acquiring the aura of perceived gentility. It became a means of social promotion, image making and self-fashioning. Additionally, however, one more aspect came into play: a courtesan also needed cash.

One might assume that beauty, talent and fame in a courtesan would ensure wealthy patrons or an elite husband who could provide her with everything she required. Liu Rushi’s diary entries before her marriage however testify to a life of financial desperation.221 At one point during the 1630s she faced imprisonment because she could not settle her debts.222 In 1634 she was accused of being a liu ji (floating i.e. unaffiliated prostitute) and threatened with banishment.223 During a particularly difficult time in 1640, just before her marriage to Qian Qianyi, she struggled to cope with illness, poverty and a broken heart when the merchant Wang Ranming lost interest in their love affair.224 And in the end, after Qian’s death, the lack of disposable assets and income sealed her fate.

Other courtesans shared her plight. Dong Xiaowan (1624-1651), who counted among the stars of the Qinhui pleasure quarters in Nanjing, got into serious debt when her father secured loans from Suzhou moneylenders against her name.225 Her lover Mao Xiang...
(1611-1693), a poet and a handsome but unsuccessful student, failed to gain office and buy her out. Qian Qianyi—who had just married Liu Rushi—had sympathy with Mao Xiang and settled Dong Xiaowan’s debts. He hosted a banquet in 1642 when she left Qinhuai to become Mao’s concubine.

For Liu Rushi money remained an issue all her life. Although her husband had risen to high office under the Ming dynasty and after its fall collaborated with the Qing government, he relied in later life on his publications for a living. In becoming her husband’s ghost-editor and authoring parts of his literary anthology and the appended biographies of him under his name, Liu would have also helped him secure a livelihood.

Concluding Remarks: Editorial Negotiations

Tracing the dynamics of discourse around two women editors from different backgrounds reveals how they fashioned images of the female self across the divides of gender and class. The production and circulation of their works involved financial negotiations as well as the trading of symbolic capital.

The activities of an elite woman like Shen Yixiu reveal how she sought to enter literati mainstream culture. Her volume promotes gentlewomen like herself while downgrading the literary achievements of another group of women perceived to differ in social and moral terms—the courtesans. The courtesans, too, sought to enhance their reputation and social status through literary pursuits. They strove to excel in poetry and the arts, often with the goal of marrying into the elite. Scholarship, such as the editing of a poetry collection, served the purpose of gaining social recognition. Editorship meant power: it empowered a gentlewoman editor like Shen Yixiu to immortalize her daughters. It empowered a courtisan editor like Liu Rushi to enhance the literary position of courtesans by giving prominence to their works. And finally, it empowered both the gentlewoman and the courtesan to show off and magnify their cultural capital.

In sum, the editors of late imperial China who negotiated gentility while transcending the boundaries of gender and class found themselves within a social network of exchange that traded cash, bodies, social status and prestige, as well as poems and edited volumes. The acts of editing and self-fashioning empowered these women to inscribe the female voice into China’s textual empire and to rewrite literary history—which so far had been conceived and presented as his story—from her point of view. In this process their carefully fashioned images of the female self created bold visions of literary immortality.

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227 Cf. Mao Pi-chi, Rinninmonen, p. 28.