
***Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature.* By LI Wai-ye. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014. Pp. xii + 638.**

Nicholas Morrow WILLIAMS

Jao Tsung-I Academy of Sinology, Hong Kong Baptist University

This major study brings to life the fall of the Ming and its afterlife in China's historical memory with almost visceral intensity. Li Wai-ye explores nearly all the literary genres of the seventeenth century, from classical poetry to novels, stories, and plays, with special attention to the fate of women, both as represented by male authors and writing in their own voices. The author exploits an incomparable breadth of reading and admirable sensitivity for narrative technique to weave together a compelling portrait of the mentality of the age; but it is her mastery of dialectic, long familiar to readers of her first book, *Enchantment and Disenchantment*, that truly raises the work to a higher plane and achieves an undeniably moral import. In this searching study of the ironies of historical judgment, we come to perceive the identities of both men and women after the fall of the Ming as the cumulative result of imaginative sympathy, redemptive suffering, and the aporias of self-perception.

Women and National Trauma consists of six chapters, each roughly one hundred pages in length; this is a work of great scope and ambition, presented with fine scholarship. Li excels at explaining the literary-historical context of the pieces under study, with targeted digressions on the poetry of Du Fu or the *Chuci* that present the relevant background as needed.¹ This whole study is richly ornamented with new translations of hundreds of key texts, including poems in their entirety and selections from drama and fiction. Adapting these texts into English is itself a serious challenge, to be sure, and though Li knows these texts too well to make any mistakes, here and there she glosses over a significant detail.

1 Occasionally the scholarship is dated. The myth that Bao Zhao 鮑照 (421–465) wrote the “Wucheng fu” 蕪城賦 after a rebellion (p. 121) was disproved decades ago and is perpetuated solely in Cambridge, Mass.

The analytical method of the book is illustrated best by the first two, complementary, chapters: “Male Voices Appropriating Feminine Diction” and “Female Voices Appropriating Masculine Diction.” Though these 200 pages would appear to have a very simple thesis, namely the parallel ways that male writers continued to employ femininity as a political trope and that female writers adopted masculine voices as claims to newly martial aspirations, the weight of the material both substantiates and alters this thesis in an original way. Above all, the counterpoint of the two chapters forces the reader to reflect again on the constraints of the imaginative spaces in which we dwell. The ambiguity of Wang Shizhen’s 王士禛 (1634–1711) “Breaking Willows” poems is familiar to students of Chinese poetry, but it prepares us to read fresh ambiguities into contemporary *ci* lyrics by women, writing of their frustrated ambitions for “heroic strivings” (p. 185).

Similarly the third chapter analyzes heroic female figures, not so much with regard to their representation of femininity as for their political significance: “Critique and defense of the late Ming, alienation from and reconciliation with Qing rule, as well as attitudes toward what the Ming-Qing transition symbolizes in later periods, are filtered through heroic transformations of women into assassins, avengers, warriors, statesmen, and knights-errant” (p. 203). This is a superb example of Li’s thoughtful readings of literary works, identifying particular political stances and their opposites, reframing female characters as figural “transformations.” This chapter climaxes with an analysis of the Lin Siniang 林四娘 episode in *Story of a Stone*, revolving around romantic irony as so often with Li: “Ultimately the contexts of performance render both of these responses to the collapse of the garden world ironic and ambiguous, perhaps a token of the unresolved contradictions in Cao Xueqin’s attitude toward the tension between imagination and reality, between love and its transcendence through ethical-political ideals” (pp. 290–91). Overall this may be the finest chapter in the book because of the way it surveys a wide variety of texts, including drama and *tanci*, but also manages to sum up the incarnations of this theme in the transcendent masterpiece of the age. Li goes even further to conclude the chapter with intimations of the 20th century, successfully tracing the formation of a theme central to both premodern and modern literature.

Consistent with her penchant for irony, Li follows the study of heroic women with a chapter on poets and courtesans. As throughout the work, she includes numerous writings by men in her purview, and one of the highlights

of the chapter is the discussion of Wu Weiye's 吳偉業 (1609–1671) “Song on Listening to the Daoist Bian Yujing Playing the Zither” 聽女道士卞玉京彈琴歌 and related poems (pp. 331–56). Though Bian Yujing's own poems in response are no longer extant (p. 335), Li shows how Wu Weiye constructs an image of Bian as a “poet-historian,” and moreover how by “turning her into such a symbol, Wu Weiye is reaffirming his own self-definition as poet-historian” (p. 356), borrowing the authentic voice of the courtesan to craft potent historical fictions.

The two final chapters examine how the brilliant women and romantic ideals of the late Ming faced the Qing conquest. Topics include poems written by abducted women and women martyred for their chastity. Li zeroes in on the subtle contrast between “political and apolitical chastity.” Though in much literature of the period chastity is identified with loyalty to the status quo regime of the Ming, in other cases, such as Ding Yaokang's 丁耀亢 (1599–1669) play *Fan of West Lake*, female protagonists evince courageous chastity yet are willing to make political compromises. One of the most powerful texts cited here is a song from this play, concluding “As for me, what is there to say about / Previous injustice? Present injustice? / Karma of love? Karma of plight? / Alas! Even with maneuvers I cannot call out for each to make way” (pp. 449–50). I wonder, however, if the last line (呀，會騰那叫不出各行方便)² might better be rendered “Alas! Though I exchange one [injustice or karma] for the other, I cannot call out for each to find an expedient,” relating this final line to the “karma” in the previous one. The karma of past and present cannot be settled and made sense of, and nor can present sacrifice and suffering act as “expedient means” (*upāya*) leading to salvation. In this reading the quotation becomes an even more eloquent comment on Professor Li's theme of the compromises necessary for the pursuit of ideals.

The sixth and final chapter examines historical judgments after the fact, beginning with the famous “Ten Days of Yangzhou” account of the plunder of the city in May 1645. Including this brutal eyewitness account of incomprehensible

2 The text as printed in Li's book is erroneous; I have reinserted the missing character *ge* 各 based on *Ding Yaokang quanji* 丁耀亢全集 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1999), 1: 763–64.

horrors is not really appropriate here, when nearly every other text under consideration is a work of imaginative fiction, but it does help to set the stage for the discussion to follow.³ Turning to poetry and fiction, Li is on much firmer ground, and the remainder of this chapter is a worthy conclusion to the study, as it shows how Qing writers conveyed judgments of praise or blame on the hapless participants in the Ming-Qing transition, very often through the figures of women. The second half of the chapter revolves around the courtesan Chen Yuanyuan 陳圓圓 (1624–1681) and her “rehabilitation” as a hero of virtue and self-determination: “historical distance displaces judgment” and “Elegiac remembrance emerges as the only fitting response” (p. 574). The oscillations of praise and blame, Ming vs. Qing, hero vs. traitor, political and apolitical chastity, etc., thus gradually evolve into a melding of contradictions in which the courtesan-hero is redeemed from judgment. Li thereby shows us how to achieve an ironic synthesis of perspectives beyond any simple accounting of loyalty or disloyalty.

I learned a great deal from this book, but would like also to reflect on certain limitations of its project, some of them perhaps not so much the limitations of the author as of our whole field in its continuing struggle to interpret the incomprehensibly vast literary corpus of premodern China. One example appears immediately in the title of the book, which does little justice to the sophistication of its contents. “Women” belies Li’s generous vision of the human condition, encompassing writings by and about men even if the focus is on portrayals of femininity. “National,” likewise, does not do justice to the concrete passions of these protagonists. The coda to chapter three (pp. 293–94) does discuss “Female Heroes and National Salvation” in the modern era, when writers truly were concerned with the creation of a proper nation-state. But Ming loyalists were by definition more concerned with a ruling house than with a “nation” which could continue under a new government. Finally, “trauma” is a psychiatric euphemism for the wholesale slaughter, rape, and destruction that is at issue in the Qing conquest, and makes this book sound less serious than it is. “Belletristic Courtesans, Martyrs to Chastity, and Dynastic Cataclysm” might have been a more accurate description of its contents.

3 Li is not the first to place this historical account in conjunction with imaginative fictions, since Stephen Owen accords it a similar treatment in his *An Anthology of Chinese Literature* (New York: Norton, 1996), 826–33. In either case I find this appropriation by literary scholars of an authentic diary of horrific suffering to be in poor taste, and much prefer the presentation of “Ten Days in Yangzhou” in Lynn Struve’s *Voices from the Ming-Qing Cataclysm: China in Tigers’ Jaws* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 32–48.

With regard to the literary quotations that fill many of the pages in this book, although Li's graceful translations reflect the content of these texts lucidly, they occasionally depart from the linguistic texture of the sources. It is a curious fact that Sinologists' treatment of their sources varies greatly with period: early China scholars debate the configuration of strokes in nonstandard graphs, and medievalists argue strenuously over diction and rhetoric, but scholars of late imperial and modern China skip blithely past specific texts to macroscopic ideological debates. But I am not convinced that this convention is correct or necessary; the men and women who feature in this book took pains to craft their poems too, and one should not overlook literary matters while mining texts for clues to a *Zeitgeist*. At the same time, to be sure, scholars of earlier periods could learn much from the larger conclusions Li is able to tease convincingly out of individual narratives. But perhaps there is something to be said for the patient application of philology with respect to these late imperial works also.

Typical of her translation strategy is Li's use of a modern term to translate a traditional one, which can be highly effective. On the level of diction, "Gently, extending to infinitude—" 漫悠悠 (p. 236) is beautifully apt. Rending the book title *Shi bi xing jian* 詩比興箋 simply as *Metaphorical and Allegorical Meanings in Poetry* (p. 98) is not just apt, but tacitly refutes a whole Sinological subtradition. On the other hand, "sweet moon" 麝月 (p. 41) must count as under-translation, like "Tunes for the select few" 陽春郢雪 (p. 55). To translate "pentasyllabic verse" 五言 as "poetry" (p. 37) in a verse about Su Wu 蘇武 (d. 60 B.C.) and Li Ling 李陵 (d. 74 B.C.) misrepresents a precise literary-historical claim as a sentiment of extreme vagueness. "I only dread another cry of the cuckoo" 只愁又聽啼 (p. 50, with the poor cuckoo further slandered as an "evil bird" on p. 52), is surely an excessively simplistic reading of both the "Li sao" and the later poem. Finally, by neglecting to look up Buddhist terminology, Li misses some interesting points: "Zhunti" 準提 (p. 274) is the goddess Cundī, worshipped not in a sutra but in a popular dhāraṇī (see also "the Mansjuri [sic] Bodhisattva leads Shancai [sic] ..." [p. 487]).

On a stylistic note, Li inserts Chinese characters into sentences without quotation marks to indicate of what they are translations, as in "Du Fu declares both Song Yu and Yu Xin his teachers in sensibility and culture 風流儒雅亦吾師 [sic]" (p. 88).⁴ Though she is not the only contemporary scholar to adopt

4 As the current style sheet of the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* explains, "If necessary, characters may be provided after English translations of a direct quote, but providing romanization is not necessary in this case." But this is only appropriate in the case of a *direct quote* identified by quotation marks.

this style, it should be firmly rejected. Scholarship published by the Harvard University Asia Center ought to be written uniformly in English without haphazard irruptions by unexplained Chinese characters.

A little more attention to fidelity in translation would have helped, then, to reconstitute in English the tremendous weight of culture and history that Professor Li has generously detailed for us in this book, which in spite of its awe-inspiring achievement is by no means conclusive. I can best illustrate this point with a line by Cao Rong 曹溶, translated by Li as “Willows on the bank, bared of branches, roused too many feelings” 隄樹無枝感萬端 (p. 93). In fact this line does not say that the feelings are too many, but rather that the willows bared of branches expose “myriad manifestations of feeling.” Our translations, likewise, should seek to represent the original ramifications of the text rather than clipping excess branches away. The poets of classical China had no conception of a surfeit of those feelings whose expression was so essential to the cultivation of the individual persona, whether masculine or feminine, chaste or unchaste, heroic or dastardly, magnificently false or suicidally sincere.