Introduction

On the nineteenth day of the third month of 1644, the Chongzhen emperor (Zhu Youjian 朱由检, 1611–44, r. 1628–44) hanged himself on Coal Hill in the suburbs of Beijing as rebels overran the capital. According to the conquerors who eventually established Qing (1644–1911) rule, this event marked the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Holdovers from Ming rule, such as the Hongguang court in Nanjing (1644–45),1 and loyalist resistance that lasted until 1662, however, raised questions on the finality of the official ending.2 Likewise, to contemporary observers, the consolidation of Qing rule was a protracted and by no means inevitable process. Even as the Kangxi emperor (1654–72, 1662–1722) came of age and stability was tentatively restored, the Rebellion of the Three Border Principalities (1673–81), led by Chinese army leaders who had defected to the Manchus and facilitated the conquest in the 1640s and 1650s, gravely challenged the newly established regime.

Contemporary writings addressing the protracted and tortuous Ming-Qing transition are filled with apocalyptic images of violence, rupture, and destruction. Some experienced the Qing conquest as a crisis of culture and tradition, symbolized among other things by the mandated change of hairstyle and costume. Others felt compelled to make

1. In the fifth month of 1644, Zhu Youjian’s cousin Zhu Yousong 朱由崧 (Prince Fu) ascended the throne in Nanjing and adopted the reign title Hongguang. This year-long continuation of Ming rule is sometimes called “the Southern Ming.”

2. See Wakeman, The Great Enterprise; Struve, The Southern Ming; Gu Cheng, Nan Ming shi. Resistance lasted until 1683, if we include Zheng Chenggong’s 鄭成功 (1624–62) force in Taiwan.
momentous choices of life and death, choosing to “perish with the country” when the Ming collapsed, amidst a chorus of intense debates on the justifications for survival or the meanings of martyrdom. Loyalists (yimin 遺民, literally, remnant persons) engaged in anti-Qing resistance or withdrew altogether from participation in the new order. Withdrawal had gradations: some shunned ties with Qing officials; others maintained them. Still others became “turncoats,” and of this group the Qianlong emperor (1711–99, r. 1736–95) invented the derogatory category of “officials who served two dynasties” (erchen 貳臣). Service under the Qing, however, did not preclude “inner distance” or mourning for the fallen dynasty.

The Ming-Qing transition coincided with a vibrant period in Chinese literary history. The emotional and psychological dimensions of political turmoil found compelling expression in many genres, including histories, witness accounts, memoirs, poetry, fiction, and drama. Reworking the old adage that literary creation is rooted in the flaws of existence, one poet wrote, “The realm’s misfortune is the poet’s good fortune” (國家不幸詩家幸). This formulation places the burden of “negative impetus” on the author’s historical context. This logic is also evident in Huang Zongxi’s 黃宗羲 (1610–95) argument that eras of decline and chaos produce great poetry: the absolute disjunction between the poet and his historical reality leads to extreme anguish, which in turn makes for powerful, involuntary poetic expression. What looks like a theory of

---

3. The lifestyle of loyalists could be ascetic or religious, but it could also be gregarious and self-indulgent.

4. The word er means “to shift allegiance” and “to be disloyal.” These biographies were intended for eventual use in the standard history of the Qing but were later published separately as Qinding guoshi erchen zhuoan 欽定國史貳臣傳. See Struve, The Ming-Qing Conflict, p. 64; Xie Guozhen, Zengding wan Ming shiji kao, pp. 775–77.


poetic genesis likely arose from the longing for poetic intervention. Huang imagines literary creation as both the product of, and recompense for, alienation and disempowerment.

Needless to say, not all of the writers of this period were responding to national trauma, but the riveting symbiosis of history and literature was such that even silence on the contemporary turmoil sometimes invited interpretations of repression or deliberate elision. Questions of how and why the Ming dynasty fell, how it should be remembered, and how its collapse defined personal and political choices dominated the early Qing literary imagination. Subsequent moments of political disorder, such as the Taiping Rebellion, the late Qing dynastic crisis, and the Sino-Japanese War, produced writings that sought prototypes of heroes, martyrs, traitors, and collaborators from the Ming-Qing transition. In the twentieth century, cultural nostalgia for a lost world destroyed by modernity, wars, and revolutions has often found metaphors of loss and retrieval in the fall of the Ming, the collapse of the Qing dynasty being too recent, messy, and implicated in the forces of destruction. Further, loyalist writings have sometimes come to represent the spirit of opposition and independence.

In taking stock of how the fall of the Ming reverberates in Qing writings and beyond, I have found the discursive and imaginative space commanded by women pivotal. Encompassing writings by women, writings about women, and men writing in a “feminine voice,” this space gives us access to the mentality of those who remembered or reflected on the dynastic transition, as well as those who reinvented its significance for later periods. It shows us how history and literature intersect, how conceptions of gender mediate the experience and expression of political disorder. In numerous writings across genres, variations on themes related to gender boundaries, female virtues, vices, agency, and ethical dilemmas are used to allegorize national destiny and the political choices of individuals. “To allegorize” is to draw on analogies ranging from transparent to elusive. Indirect modes of expression (深曲, 隱曲) often involve a man taking up a woman’s voice or persona. The crossing of gender boundaries emerges as a recurring theme, as male poets renewed the tradition of charging feminine diction and metaphors with political meanings while women poets turned to political engagement and heroic strivings in their writings.
Introduction

It is fitting, therefore, that this book should begin with chapters exploring the relationship between gender and boundaries. I am not interested in defining quintessentially (or even historically evolving) male and female voices. The terms “feminine” and “masculine” are but pointers to their usual imagistic associations in conventional critical writings. The more pertinent issue is how shifts in gender roles test the boundaries of imagining and representing experience. Chapter 1 explores how the wonted tradition of male poets using feminine diction to convey political meanings developed during the Ming-Qing transition. The idea is as old as the *Verses of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭) tradition (ca. 3rd c. BCE)—and once it took hold, many poems in the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經) were retroactively interpreted along the same lines. The tradition of using “beauties and fragrant flora” 美人香草 to refer to (usually unsuccessful) political quests persisted through different periods, but one of its high points was in the mid-seventeenth century. It also comes up often in reappraisals of earlier poets. Indeed, our very impression of certain poets as masters of “metaphorical and allegorical meanings” 比興寄托 employing the language of romantic longing for political purposes is often based on early Qing interpretations. Several early Qing commentary editions of the poetry of Li Shangyin 李商隱 (813–58), for example, chart the political implications of what could have been read as love poetry.\(^7\) A collection of song lyrics from the Song-Yuan transition (ca. 1280s), *The Supplementary Titles of the Music Bureau* (*Yuefu buti* 樂府補題), was rediscovered in 1679. The scholar and poet Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊 (1629–1709) presented the ornate, sensual, and melancholy song lyrics in that collection as elegies to political ideals, and Chen Weisong 陳維崧 (1625–82), another great lyricist, described them as loyalist laments.\(^8\) Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582–1664) argued that “subtle expression” 微 marks the continuity between poetry and historical writings in chaotic times.\(^9\)

The confluence of political disorder and a poetics of indirectness will define the broad context for chapter 1.

I will address a spectrum of partially overlapping possibilities—a male writer “passing” for a woman, adopting a female voice or persona, or turning to feminine choices, emotions, and perspectives as poetic topics. The possible correspondence between private and public domains, romantic and political expressions will lead to more general ruminations on the parameters of a poetics of indirectness. My focus will be the implications of such poetic choices for expression and communication, especially in moments of national crisis that render both more urgent and more difficult. During the Ming-Qing transition, censorship necessitated subterfuge, and ambivalent, contradictory emotions sought refuge in indirect expression, even as politicized readings become a pervasive practice among the poets’ contemporaries as well as their posterity.

When does “hiding behind a woman” convey a clearly coded, albeit indirectly expressed, political message? Under what circumstances does that poetic choice express real ambivalence about historical changes? How do female personae and feminine imagery function as a cipher affirming common ground or negotiating differences in poetic exchanges within male literary communities? One thing is certain: this acknowledged convention can have the effect of framing the interpretive act as the focus of attention (even, at times, dramatizing it), and in the process, it allows us to see how and why a time-honored formula can inspire a range of different readings. The rich contextual materials in this period also grant us glimpses into the social functions of this poetic convention or its realization as a social process.

Chapter 2 explores how political disorder transforms gender roles in women’s writings. If male voices using feminine diction for allegorical purposes in the mid-seventeenth century drew on numerous antecedents in the Chinese poetic tradition, early Qing women writers who challenged gender boundaries started a new tradition, whose echoes would reverberate in the rhetoric of revolution as the Qing dynasty faced imminent demise. In the extant corpus of China’s most famous woman poet Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1081–ca. 1141), we can find one song lyric and a handful of poems that break the mode of delicate restraint 婉约 and speak of heroic yearning or address historical, political themes. The significant number of women writing about their contemporary crisis
represents a new phenomenon; there was simply nothing comparable before the Ming-Qing transition. More generally, this was one of the high points in women’s literary culture in the late imperial period.\textsuperscript{10}

The toll of war and devastation raises perennial questions of human agency and limits, and for some women writers the Ming-Qing transition created or heightened the real and imagined space for heroic aspirations, political engagement, and historical understanding, as I will show in chapter 2. Poems about fallen blossoms or dying willows from this period, if written by a man, will likely be mined for metaphorical meanings or political references, especially if his biography supplies clues for such readings.\textsuperscript{11} A woman writing on the same topics would not have expected her writings to be interpreted (by default) in political terms. She would thus have supplied somewhat more explicit “allegorical indices” even if she adhered to a style of delicate restraint.

Alternatively, she might have chosen to write directly about witnessing, understanding, and remembering the momentous events of her times. In doing so, she would sometimes question gender roles and stereotypes. In addition, women involved in resistance or sympathetic to the loyalist cause often self-consciously developed a martial, heroic self-image. References to swords and military imagery in women’s writings from this period are on rare occasions literal; more often than not they encode an independent spirit or heroic aspirations, or they become a symbol of gender discontent. More generally, discontent with gender roles often emerges as the pre-condition for, as well as the consequence of, political engagement. It explains in part concomitant changes in the rhetoric of friendship (between women, and between men and women)—we see a new emphasis on political, intellectual, and spiritual common ground, sometimes tied to a sense of common cause or a shared experience of national calamity. This is also a self-reflexive moment: many of

\textsuperscript{10} See Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chamber; Idema and Grant, The Red Brush; Fong, Herself an Author; Deng Hongmei, Nüxing cishi; Zhao Xuepei, Ming wo Qing chu nii ciren yanjiu; Kang-i Sun Chang, Gudian yu xiandai de nüxing chanshi; Widmer, “Ming Loyalism.”

\textsuperscript{11} See, for example, Wang Fuzhi’s ninety-nine heptasyllabic regulated verses on fallen blossoms (Chuanshan quanshu, 15:565–84) and Gui Zhuang’s poems on the same subject (Gui Zhuang ji, 1:119–23). We read these as anguished political laments because Wang and Gui were staunch loyalists. The political interpretations of Wang Shizhen’s “Autumn Willow” poems and of the poetic exchanges they inspired will be discussed in chapter 1.
these women writers often self-consciously dwell on what it means to write and particularly to write as a woman.

While chapter 2 focuses on women poets who wrote about heroic aspirations, chapter 3 deals with the representation of real and imagined heroes. Moving from poetry to prosimetric fiction (tanci 弹词), I present the story of a putative mid-seventeenth-century female author who claims to be driven by autobiographical impulse to retrace the relationship between herself and her father by writing about the Ming collapse. Using internal clues, I date the text to a later period, the eighteenth century: this leads to questions such as, why did a woman writer who did not directly experience the Ming-Qing transition invoke the Ming dynastic crisis to articulate the bonds and battles between father and daughter? How does political disorder legitimate a daughter’s rebellion and charge her with a patrimonial burden?

More generally, representations of heroic women lend dignity and pathos to the cataclysmic turmoil of the mid-seventeenth century. The need to memorialize or to fantasize about a female hero asserting her agency, defending a crumbling order, or creating a new one stems from a desire to probe limits and to imagine alternatives in the face of political disorder. In the context of early Qing critiques of late Ming sensibility and reevaluations of romantic-aesthetic values, these heroic stories encompass their authors’ indictment, nostalgia, apology, regrets, self-definition, and historical judgment, inseparable from their memory of and reflections on the dynastic transition. I will examine how the trope of heroic transformation modulates different views of the Ming-Qing transition and what it stands for in later periods. Mechanisms of suppression and selective amnesia may determine the memory of historical female heroes. The female hero may be used to indict the collective failure of scholar-officials and of the military command or to defend the self-redemption of late Ming romantic-aesthetic values. She may have to be glorified, yet tamed, in the complex and at times contentious process of imagining a new order. Her heroic image may sublimate violence, dignify failure, turn the past into aesthetic spectacle, and negotiate the claims of the old order vis-à-vis the new one. The idea of “transformations” also points to the shadows surrounding heroic images—hinting at their origins or what they may become, revealing the inherent tensions or contradictions in their making. This is especially evident when we have multiple versions of the same personage or story.
Introduction

Heroic stories premised on fictional distance in chapter 3 are tied to historical retrospection or broad arguments about the Ming-Qing transition. Chapter 4 shifts scale and turns to remembrances and personal experiences. Writing about courtesans and concubines who displayed valor and resolve, the authors featured in this chapter use details and fragments to retrace memories and to question or defend their own past and present choices, often implicitly pondering the fate of pleasures and passions that shaped their personal history as well as collective memory, as late Ming culture is revisited through the lens of dynastic collapse. Theirs is an “affective” understanding of the past that fuses romantic nostalgia with political lament.

Vignettes about women of talent and sensibility, often expressed in stories of their sad fate and suffering during the dynastic transition, recur in the early Qing literature of remembrance. This literature tends to carry an implicit defense of late Ming romantic sensibility, which is presented as inseparable from moral courage and political idealism. For loyalist writers once steeped in late Ming courtesan culture, these memories became part of their self-definition. At times, writing about women also led to an interest in the recovery and transmission of women’s writings, whose associations with loss and erasure acquire greater symbolic significance in the context of political disorder. For Ming officials who served under the Qing, the proposition that romantic sensibility is instrumental for moral or heroic action is more ambiguous and problematic. I will examine how three important men of letters, all tainted by compromise, turned the women they loved into emblems of valor, resolution, and political integrity. How do “objects of desire” become heroes? The contexts and implications of such transformations differ, but they often define the authors’ own projected self-transformation, motivated by a mixture of self-reproach and self-justification.

Chapter 5 turns to questions of victimhood and agency. In terms of sheer quantity, the most numerous writings about women during this period may be eulogies of women who “perished with the country” 殉國, often as “chastity martyrs” (烈女,烈婦) who committed suicide to escape rape or were killed defying the enemy (be they bandit rebels, the Qing army, or renegade Ming soldiers). Their deaths are often presented as acts of self-assertion, because there is solace and recompense in the idea of the victim’s agency. Often exemplified by poems on walls題壁詩 or articles of clothing left by women abducted and “taken away
on horseback,” these writings include anguished laments, “suicide notes,” pleas for assistance, as well as poetic testimonies and judgments of the contemporary crisis. Reflecting an abiding fascination with the victim’s voice, these writings by (or attributed to) victimized women in turn invite poetic responses that debate the appropriate choices for an abducted woman whose chastity is imperiled. The virtual literary community and discursive space thus defined demonstrate the shifting margins between judging and being judged. Divergent attribution and circumstantial details for the same poems in various accounts also illuminate the forces behind the appropriation and varying uses of these writings.

The agency available to such victims captured readers’ interest. Being on the road, albeit against their will, was sometimes imagined as a kind of freedom. There are poems, stories, and plays about women who assume new identities or who fall in love under these adverse circumstances. Romances or marriages thwarted because of national calamity also collapse the boundaries between private and public realms in lamentations of lost love. In this context, accounts of romantic reunions have inevitable political implications; sometimes they are achieved as fantasies of recompense or reconciliation in the new political landscape. In addition to ubiquitous comparisons of female chastity with male political integrity, there are also versions of “apolitical chastity”—chaste women amenable to political compromises—that allow authors to imagine accommodation with the new order.

These stories explore and test different shades of accommodation: what if chastity itself is compromised, for example? In the Chinese tradition, ethical dilemmas (e.g., a person caught between loyalty to the state and filial piety) are often “resolved” through suicide. What should a woman choose when her parents or her husband’s family implore her to sacrifice her honor in order to save their lives? Rather than committing suicide, often the victimized woman protects her family by sacrificing or

12. For some examples, see Gu Shanzhen, Ke Dian shu, p. 8; Ji Yun, Yuewei caotang biji, 3.40. In Gu’s example, the mother-in-law ordered the widowed daughter-in-law to submit to rebels so that her husband’s family could be saved. In Ji’s account (set in the last years of the Chongzhen era), a young woman watched her parents being tortured and was in the end killed along with them because she would not allow herself to be defiled. Ji finds her dilemma so troubling that he refuses to weigh in on whether she should have relented.
at least compromising her chastity. I will discuss stories that justify compromised chastity by crossing boundaries and exploring the gray zone between integrity and complicity, virtue and self-interest, truth and equivocation.

In contrast to such interest in “crossing boundaries” is the implacable moral certainty behind the praise of heroic women who eluded or defied their captors by suffering violent deaths. The implied logic seems to be that the more violent their deaths, the more remarkable their virtue. In an era when concrete, detailed depictions of violence during the dynastic transition were rare, the suffering female body became the venue for remembering trauma. Chapter 6 begins by considering the relationship between violence, memory, and historical judgment. Using as case study the depiction of the Yangzhou massacre of 1645—one of the most violent episodes of the Qing conquest—in miscellanies, fiction, local gazetteers, poetry, and biographies, I examine how the fate and choices of Yangzhou women help us understand how trauma is remembered and how historical judgments are formed. What kinds of rhetoric serve the respective arguments for eulogies or denigration of women caught up in these events? How and why are “licentious women” made to emblematize the shame of conquest, while women who died resisting real or potential violation are elevated as martyrs in various genres? What are the contexts facilitating or qualifying the logic of blame in the first case? And what are the negotiations underlying the logic of praise in the second? How are their political meanings defined, and why does spectacular virtue need aestheticized violence?

As Yangzhou returned to prosperity during the early Qing, the memory and erasure of trauma can be traced to the varying images of Yangzhou women and the ambiguous role of sensual, feminine imagery in the poetic exchanges bringing together diverse members in literary communities. The celebration of Yangzhou reminds us of the allure of Jiangnan culture and its late Ming moment of glory. The question of judgment thus leads us to consider its problematic realization. This is especially pertinent for those writers with no personal memory of the fallen dynasty. They pursue the promise of “second generation memory,” whereby historical retrospection unfolds in the balance and tension between nostalgia and judgment, both mediated through the writings of, or friendship with, the generation that lived through the Ming-Qing transition.
The female type that most readily invites negative judgment in the tradition is the femme fatale who inspires passions that undermine the polity. Yet the woman said to have played a pivotal role in the Qing conquest, the famous courtesan Chen Yuanyuan 陳圓圓 (b. ca. 1620s), eludes the clear explanations and categorical judgments usually linked to the figure of the femme fatale. The dominant narrative, especially by the late Qing, becomes one of redemption—whether it is achieved through religion, nationalism, or her judgment and self-understanding. She thus ends up illuminating the conditions and functions of historical judgment.

In presenting the main arguments of my book, I have deliberately refrained from specific titles and authors in the belief that an avalanche of names, some of them famous but many of them probably unfamiliar, will not be helpful to the reader. The genres I discuss include poetry, song lyrics, drama (both the shorter northern plays [zaju 雜劇] and much longer southern plays [chuanqi 傳奇]), classical tales, vernacular stories, full-length vernacular fiction, prosimetric fiction, memoirs, miscellanies, biographies, and local gazetteers. I realize doing so involves some risk—generic history and conventions may not receive enough attention, and supposed thematic shifts may just mask generic differences. However, I have enjoyed the process of following the lead of my materials as their connections unfold, and I hope the reader will also. Most of the works within my purview belong to the Ming-Qing transition and early Qing (mid-17th c. to early 18th c.), but I have found it necessary to delve into mid-Qing, late Qing, and Republic materials because of the ways the fall of the Ming resonates in the writings from these later periods. If given the properly detailed exposition, these reprises may expand this book’s scope beyond my competence and the reader’s patience, and I have therefore kept them as mere echoes and reverberations.