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## Talented Women in Local Gazetteers of the Lingnan Region during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries\*

Susan Mann\*\*

The single most important discovery by U.S. feminist historians who study late imperial China has been the image of the *ts'ai-nü* 才女 (talented woman).<sup>①</sup> This admittedly provocative statement may surprise historians in Taiwan, who have long viewed the *ts'ai-nü* as a commonplace of late imperial drama, literature, and memoir. However, for U.S. historians the image of the *ts'ai-nü* has opened new approaches to the study of gender relations in Chinese history: 1) by posing new historical questions about temporal and spatial variation in Chinese culture, and 2) by problematizing features of the Chinese family system that we have long taken for granted.

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\*\* Professor, Department of History, University of California, Davis.

① See in particular Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

This preliminary survey of *ts'ai-nü* imagery in Lingnan's local gazetteers will illustrate the point.

The term *ts'ai-nü* which appears repeatedly in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prose, has no exact classical precedent.<sup>②</sup> Homophones can be found in titles given to court ladies in earlier times. *Ts'ai-nü* (written 采女), or Lady of Elegance, designating a low-ranking imperial concubine in the Han (206 BCE - 221 CE) court, remained in use through the Song (960-1279). A similar title, *ts'ai-jen* (written 才人), or Lady of Talents, was variously applied to imperial consorts from the Han through the Ming. Still another variant, which anticipates the term's ambiguous meaning in the late empire, is the term *ts'ai-nü* (written 彩女), or Pleasure Girl. The title Pleasure Girl was given to one of three categories of unranked women in the Later Han palace, doubtless referring to a female entertainer, especially a dancer or musician. The English translation conveys its tone perfectly.<sup>③</sup> Finally, the word "talent" itself (*ts'ai*) is used with reference to women in combination with other characters, as in *ts'ai-hui* 才慧, "talented and wise," or *ts'ai-i* 才藝, "talented and artistic." In late imperial times, such terms occasionally serve as subheadings to classify biographies of exemplary women in local gazetteers, marking the section reserved for women writers; more commonly, they appear as adjectives describing talented women in the text of biographies themselves.

Given this contradictory lexical history, it is not surprising that the *ts'ai-nü* of late imperial times was an ambiguous figure. The phrase *ts'ai-nü* can be found in admiring comments on courtesans who commanded top billing in the pleasure quarters of Yang-chou, Nan-ching, and other

② This on the word of Morohashi, *Dai Kan-Wa jiten* 大漢和辭典 vol. 5, no.11769.78, where he glosses the term, without a locus classicus, as *saichi no sugureta fujin* (a woman of surpassing wit and wisdom).

③ See Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), nos. 6839, 6830, and 6838, respectively.

Lower Yangtze cities. The term also appears, along with other terms such as *nü-shih* 女史 (female writer) or another homophone, *nü-shih* 女士 (gentlewoman, or, more recently, female intellectual),<sup>④</sup> to signify a talented woman, especially a poet, or (less commonly) a calligrapher or painter. In biographies and memoirs of upper-class families, a very young girl who is called a *ts'ai-nü* will shed the term as she matures, to emerge as a *nü-shih*, signifying her membership in the class called *kuei-hsiu* 閨秀 (genteel ladies), women who were cloistered and educated in the inner apartments of upper-class gentry households.

We could compare the emergence of the *ts'ai-nü* figure in upper-class society during the late empire to the emergence of the *shih* 士 (scholar) class during the early empire. Like the *shih*, the *ts'ai-nü* was regarded as an emblem of the political, social, and cultural transformations of her age. Like the *shih*, she might embody the fusion of scholarly and moral authority. Or, like the *shih*, her literary skills might be squandered in frivolous and decadent pursuits. In any case, the naming of the *ts'ai-nü* as a historical personage, and her celebration as a model for the human possibilities inherent in educated women, invite scholars to ask new questions about the history of Chinese women.

### Spatial variation in the distribution of talented women: the Lower Yangtze and Lingnan regions

In the course of a study of women writers in Chiang-nan in the mid-Qing period, I discovered distinct regional and even microregional patterns in the distribution of women writers during the Ch'ing dynasty. Data from one comprehensive survey of women's writings suggested that

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④ This term is enjoying a revival in contemporary society among professional Chinese women on both sides of the strait.

more than 70 percent of Ch'ing women writers came from the core of one of China's ten macroregions: the Lower Yangtze; moreover, within the Lower Yangtze region itself, women writers appeared to be concentrated in two tiny subregions centered on Ch'ang-chou and Hang-chou.<sup>⑤</sup> This unusual clustering of female talent suggests that regional and local cultures might have affected the environment for women who wanted to write. For example, one might suppose that in some local cultures (Ningpo, for example), the high value attached to women's seclusion and the distaste for women's public presence would be sufficient to discourage women from writing, or, perhaps more accurately, to discourage women from preserving, circulating, and publishing what they wrote. *Ts'ai-nü*, in short, do not appear everywhere in equal numbers in proportion to the rest of the population. On the contrary, the distribution of *ts'ai-nü* varies dramatically within and across macroregions during the late empire.

Perhaps the sharpest and most perplexing contrast is the difference between the macroregions of Lingnan and the Lower Yangtze that emerges in Hu Wen-k'ai's survey of women's writing through the ages. Lingnan is comparable to the Lower Yangtze region in many respects. Both are coastal regions with high levels of commercial wealth. Both boast historically high levels of investment in education and learning, especially in core areas with longstanding reputations for academic excellence. In addition, both are highly urbanized regions where print culture was pervasive, and

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⑤ This conclusion is based on an analysis of data from Hu Wen-k'ai's survey of women's writings. According to data in Hu's survey, of the 3184 Ch'ing women writers for whom a native place is known, 2258 – 70.9 percent – hailed from the Lower Yangtze region; and of those, nearly forty percent were concentrated in only ten counties. See Hu Wen-k'ai 胡文楷, *Li-tai fu-nü chu-tso k'ao* 歷代婦女著作考 (A survey of women writers through the ages), preface dated 1957; Shanghai: Shang-hai ku-chi ch'u-pan she, 1985. Findings are presented and analyzed in Susan Mann, *Women in Eighteenth-Century China: Gender and Culture in the Lower Yangtze Region* (Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

both support complex specialized commercial agriculture supplemented by household handicraft industries. Yet by comparison with the Lower Yangtze, Hu's data from the Lingnan region show it lagging far behind in nurturing women's talent. The Lingnan region, with an urbanization rate of 7 percent in the early nineteenth century – second only to that of the Lower Yangtze – nevertheless produced only a small fraction of Ch'ing women writers identified in Hu Wen-k'ai's survey – 125, or barely 4 percent of the total, placing Lingnan well below three other less urbanized regions.<sup>⑥</sup> Such broad interregional differences might, of course, be artifacts of the data collection process itself, perhaps reflecting Hu Wen-k'ai's own assumptions about where talented women should be found.<sup>⑦</sup> But Hu seems to have identified the main localities where Lingnan's women writers were active, and a preliminary check of local gazetteers he did not examine does not challenge his findings.<sup>⑧</sup>

Although the absolute number of talented women in Lingnan appears small, local gazetteers leave no doubt that educating women was important to the reputation of native places in the core counties of the region. The civilizing influence of women on their families and on the customs of the country was celebrated in an important sixteenth-century didactic work written for female teachers by the noted Hsiang-shan 香山 scholar Huang Tso 黃佐 (1490–1566). Huang, writing self-consciously in the tradition of

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⑥ For definitions of macroregions and data on regional urbanization, see G. William Skinner, "Regional Urbanization in Nineteenth-Century China," in G. W. Skinner, ed., *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp.211–249, esp. 213.

⑦ This point was brought to my attention by Mr. Wing-kai To, a specialist in the history of the Lingnan region. Others have echoed the observation, including (at a recent seminar in the Institute of Modern History) Dr. Liu Ts'ui-jung.

⑧ These "core" counties for women writers, according to Hu, are: Shun-te, with 20 women writers in Ch'ing times; Pán-yü, with 16; Nan-hai, with 11; Hsiang-shan (Chung-shan), with 9; Tung-kuan, with 5; Hsin-hui, with 4; Mao-ming, with 3; and Wu-ch'uan, with 3.

Chu Hsi 朱熹, supported women's education but was perhaps ambivalent about nurturing women's literary talent. Titled *Mu hsun* 姆訓 (Instructions for the governess), the work invokes Chu Hsi's injunction that "daughters too should be educated."<sup>9</sup> In what follows, we will examine briefly the different levels of women's education described in Lingnan gazetteers and explore the range of talent women display in the historical record for that region.

The term used for gifted women in Lingnan's local gazetteers was a phrase in common use at the time: *ming yuan* 名媛. The word *ming* means "noted," or "famous." Historically, *yuan* referred to a woman whose reputation embellished the fame of a kingdom and/or a particular family,<sup>10</sup> making the common English translation – "princess" – unusually apt. One might suggest as a translation for *ming yuan* the phrase "literary princess" – a woman whose fame has spread because of her birth and her talent. The chapter on literary art (*i-wen* 藝文) in the Kuang-chou prefectural gazetteer (*Kuang-chou fu chih* 廣州府志) of 1879 provides an example of the use of the term, listing works by 28 gifted women of the

<sup>9</sup> See *Hsiang-shan hsien chih* 1828:8/22a, quoting Huang's preface. Patricia Ebrey points out that Chu Hsi and Ch'eng I 程頤 favored education for women, but felt ambivalent about female literary talent expressed in poetry or prose. See Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.124. Huang Tso himself came from a patriline that honored a learned woman, his mother, née Ch'en 陳, as noted in the same gazetteer (8/70a).

<sup>10</sup> The term *yuan* is an ancient word for a woman descended from or married into a ruling house. She symbolizes the virtue of the ruler and the glory of his kingdom. The term appears in the *Book of Odes* (Shih ching) as one of the *Odes of Yung*, "Chün-tzu chieh-lao" 君子偕老 (Growing old together with her husband) [Mao #47]. The poem celebrates the adornment and the virtues of the ruler's consort. "Ah," exclaims the poet in concluding, "such a woman as this! The beauty of the country! [*pang chih yuan yeh* 邦之媛也]." (Translation from Legge, pp.76–78.) The phrase *ming yuan* therefore conflates beauty and virtue, signifying at once a famous beauty and a woman of good family.

late imperial period under the category *ming yuan*.<sup>①</sup> The most flamboyant example of a literary princess in the Kuang-chou prefectural gazetteer is the case of Ch'en Jui-chen 陳瑞貞 of P'an-yü 番禺 county.<sup>②</sup> By the age of six or seven, under the tutelage of a governess (*nü shih* 女師), she had mastered the Classic of Filial Piety (*Hsiao ching* 孝經), the "Rules of the inner chambers" (Nei tse 內則) section of the Book of Rites (*Li chi* 禮記), Liu Hsiang's *Lieh-nü chuan* 列女傳, and Pan Chao's 班昭 *Nü chieh* 女誡. Reared in the "inner quarters" of the family compound, she never ventured even as far as the middle courtyard. However, in the twentieth year of the Hung-wu reign (1387/88), her cloistered life ended when word of her inaccessibility caused her to be selected as a "pure young girl from among the commoners" (*min-chien shu nü* 民間淑女) and inducted as a female officer staffing the palace services for court ladies. At the Ming court, word of Ch'en's talent in calligraphy and reading spread quickly, making her a popular instructor for the imperial concubines. In Ch'en's story, talent cultivated in private produces a public profile, bringing her not just local but imperial recognition.

A similar biography, in *Shun-te hsien chih*<sup>③</sup> 順德縣志, records the life of Huang Wei-te 黃惟德, who served in the Imperial Wardrobe Service under four Ming rulers and was presented with a painting by the empress herself when she finally left the palace to marry. Huang entered the female bureaucracy at the court in the twentieth year of the Hung-wu reign; she was apparently chosen because of her learning. The editor, Liang T'ing-nan 梁廷枏, himself the father of two talented daughters, comments pointedly<sup>④</sup> that although Huang's biography was omitted from

① *Kuang-chou fu chih* 1879:95/15a-17b.

② *Kuang-chou fu chih* 1879:145/2a.

③ See *Shun-te hsien chih* 1853:28/3a-4b.

④ *Shun-te hsien chih* 1853:28/4b.

earlier gazetteers, even Liu Hsiang did not confine his biographies of exemplary women to widows.

Gazetteers hint at a subtle hierarchy differentiating the women recognized for their talent in chapters on exemplary women. At the bottom of the hierarchy of female talent we find reading (*neng tu shu* 能讀書). Next comes mastery of specific texts, starting with the basic didactic texts for young girls: the *Classic of Filial Piety* and the *Lieh-nü chuan* or the “Neitse” section of the *Book of Rites*. For example, Cheng Chüan-niang 鄭娟娘 studied the *Analects for Women* (*Nü lun-yü* 女論語) with her elder brother when she was five *sui*.<sup>15</sup> Kao Jo-k’uei 高若奎, known as a faithful young widow, “read the *Lieh-nü chuan* and the *Nü chieh* when young.”<sup>16</sup> Of Su Ch’ing-shan 蘇清蟾 it was said that “at seven she had mastered the *Classic of Filial Piety*, the *Four Books*, and the *Lieh-nü chuan*. She especially like to read *Mencius*.” (The biographer also comments, more marginally, that this same girl began studying the art of physiognomy with a nun at the age of 13 *sui*.)<sup>17</sup>

Mastery (*t’ung* 通) of a text, which is sometimes mentioned, meant not only rote memorization, but also comprehending the profound meaning of classical texts. This level of comprehension would enable a young girl to answer questions about the text and to quote from it at well-chosen moments, but also to discuss it intelligently in adult company. The wife of Chou Jui-hsiung 鄒瑞熊, née Liang 梁, was said to be not only “able to read” but also to “comprehend the larger meaning” of classical works.<sup>18</sup> Women read and memorized not only the classics but also, in some cases, the histories. An example is Ch’en Ju-hsi’s 陳如錫 daughter,

<sup>15</sup> See *Kuang-chou fu chih* 1879:155/2a.

<sup>16</sup> See *Wu-ch’uan hsien chih* 1888:8/11a.

<sup>17</sup> See *Shun-te hsien chih* 1853:29/1b.

<sup>18</sup> *Kao-chou fu chih* 高州府志 1890:40/8b.

who “as a young girl mastered [classical] works and histories” (*yu t'ung shu shih* 幼通書史).<sup>①⑨</sup>

There is a difference, of course, between being able to read and being able to write, and not all women credited with learning were known as writers. Biographers refer specifically to writing as a separate talent, sometimes by citing the title of a collection of poetry, sometimes by mentioning a woman's talent for writing. Biographies speak of such girls as “being able to write” (*neng wen* 能文), or having talent as a poet (*kung shih* 工詩 or *neng shih* 能詩). Their works survived only if they were collected and printed, usually by family members, most often by a doting father, brother, or spouse. An unusually accomplished young prodigy could write poetry and prose, showed skill as a calligrapher and painter (*neng shih wen tzu hua* 能詩文字畫), and played the *ch'in* 琴 (classical zither) as well.<sup>②⑩</sup>

In general, biographies stressing dazzling talent are reserved for young prodigies. However, we do find wives who are also known for their talent. For instance, the wife of Wu P'an-t'an 吳泮菴, née Li 李, was “intelligent and able to write poetry,” according to her biographers,<sup>②①</sup> and the wife of Lin Yü-hsuan 林玉璿, née I 易, “mastered *wen*.”<sup>②②</sup> For mature women, however, accounts of erudition often shift from discussions of the talent of the *ts'ai-nü* herself to focus on her success in educating sons and/or grandsons. Typical of these stories is the biography of Liang Ying-wen's 梁應文 wife, née Wang 汪, who was widowed at the age of 27, educated her sons, and in her old age continued to spin and weave at night while

<sup>①⑨</sup> *Kuang-chou fu chih* 1879:145/26a.

<sup>②⑩</sup> *Kuang-chou fu chih* 1879:142/27b. See also 147/24a, where divination is added to the repertoire of the talented woman.

<sup>②①</sup> *Kao-chou fu chih* 1890:40/10a.

<sup>②②</sup> See *Wu-ch'uan hsien chih* 1888:8/64a.

instructing her grandsons.<sup>23</sup> Exemplary widows like this one leave behind imperial certificates of merit in lieu of published works as a testimony to the high level of local culture.

On the other hand, some widows, we are told, kept the learning of their youth alive as a comfort and used it to assuage their loneliness. As a young widow who willingly embraced chastity and poverty, for example, Liang Kuo-hsien's 梁國獻 daughter – who learned to read from her father as a little girl – took pleasure from reading during her lonely years of service to her parents-in-law.<sup>24</sup> The wife of Li Ho-hsiang 李鶴祥, née Chao 招, who became best-known as a faithful widow, was also “able to write poetry,” her biographers tell us.<sup>25</sup>

Occasional stories move beyond the image of the mature woman as mother or widow, telling of companionate wives and their husbands. One such tale concerns Ch'en Kuang-sun 陳廣遜 who, like her spouse, earns money teaching (both tutor the children of wealthy families, he teaching boys and she girls) and chants poetry with him whenever they manage to earn enough money to retreat home.<sup>26</sup>

The collected works of these talented women, where they survived, became themselves emblems of local culture, and they were listed in local gazetteers as evidence of the literary achievements of the elite. For instance, the collected poems of three different female authors are cited as a point of pride in the *i-wen* 藝文 chapter of the Wu-ch'uan 吳川 county gazetteer of 1888.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Kuang-chou fu chih* 1879:147/11a. Such stories are repeated often, invoking the image of Mencius's mother. See, for example, *Hsiang-shan hsien chih* 1828:7/49b.

<sup>24</sup> *Shun-te hsien chih* 1853:29/27b-28a.

<sup>25</sup> See *Wu-ch'uan hsien chih* 1888:8/22b.

<sup>26</sup> See *Kuang-chou fu chih* 1879:147/24a.

<sup>27</sup> Works by Huang Chih-shu 黃之淑, by Li Ho-hsiang's wife, née Chao 招, and by Sun Shu-ying 孫淑嫻. See *Wu-ch'uan hsien chih* 1888:9/35b-36a.

Doting fathers are a visible presence in the background of many stories, especially biographies of women whose work was eventually published. The wife of Li Ho-hsiang, mentioned above, whose own poetry collection is listed in her home county gazetteer, lost her mother when she was eight *sui*. Her father, who was extremely fond of her, took pity on her loss<sup>28</sup> and brought her along to lessons with her elder brothers, where she proved extremely intelligent. As she grew older and became a skilled needleworker, she continued to read aloud in her spare time whenever she had a chance. Her father and stepmother, judging this an inappropriate form of “women’s work,” put a stop to it. Nevertheless, her father could not resist pointing to her and goading her brothers with the words, “If she had been a boy, she would have filled our household with the fragrance of learning! [i.e. *she* might have been successful in the examinations].” Even after her marriage, her private rooms were filled with books and her desk covered with inkstones and brushes. There she would sit with her husband, discussing poetry as if they were in an academy.<sup>29</sup> Note that in this story her erudition lends a special note of poignancy to a daughter’s widowhood.

Shun-te occupies pride of place in the Lingnan repertoire of talented women, in part because of the fame of one writer: Li Wan-fang 李晚芳, compiler of work titled *Nü hsueh yen hsing tsuan* 女學言行纂 (Collected words and actions illustrating women’s learning), first published in 1751.<sup>30</sup> The Shun-te county gazetteer of 1853 lists literary collections

<sup>28</sup> See Hsiung Ping-chen’s 熊秉真 sensitive discussion of the emotional costs of losing a mother at this young age, “Shih-k’uei Ming-Ch’ing yu-erh ti jen-shih huan-ching yü ch’ing-kan shih-chieh” 試窺明清幼兒的人事環境與情感世界 (Preliminary observations on the human environment and the emotional world of children in Ming and Ch’ing times,” *Pen-t’u hsün-li-hsueh yen-chiu* 本土心理學研究 2 (December 1993), esp. p.262.

<sup>29</sup> See *Wu-ch’uan hsien chih* 1888:8/22b.

<sup>30</sup> Printed in three *chüan*, the work was listed as extant in 1822, the date when

by nine women, two from the Ming dynasty and seven from the Ch'ing, including Li Wan-fang's.<sup>①</sup> One of the Ming writers, Yü Yü-hsing 余玉馨, wrote more than 300 poems and nearly a hundred historical essays during a burst of creativity inspired after she successfully gave birth to two sons following years of failed pregnancies and literary despond. Her husband edited her writings, publishing the half he considered suitable in a collection of ten *chüan*.<sup>②</sup>

Perhaps the most famous of the nine women honored in the Shun-te gazetteer are the two daughters of Liang T'ing-nan 梁廷柵, Yuan-yü 媛玉 and T'i-yü 媿玉. A collection of their poems and prose, printed in one *chüan*, was personally inscribed by Lin Tse-hsü 林則徐. Lin recalls his amazement and curiosity about the thousands of tiny characters ("tiny as the head of a fly") annotating the maps and charts accompanying the classic work on coastal defense, the *Kuang-tung hai-fang hui-lan* 廣東海防彙覽, which Liang had completed editing in 1836. Liang told him that his two daughters had written every word.<sup>③</sup>

Fathers provided other kinds of role models for their daughters, as we read in one account of a coastal village where a talented woman uses

the comprehensive gazetteer of Kuang-tung province edited by Juan Yuan 阮元 appeared (see *Kuang-tung t'ung-chih* 1822:194/15b). According to Hu Wen-k'ai, it was reprinted in 1937. I have not yet been able to examine it.

① *Shun-te hsien chih* 1853:18/42a-43a.

② *Shun-te hsien chih* 1853:18/42a. The other Ming writer from Shun-te is Ch'en Yun-hsien 陳雲仙 (18/42a). Another account of Yü Yü-hsing's life appears in the same gazetteer (28/8b-9a) in the chapter on exemplary women. This account calls attention to her historical judgment, as seen in her essays on famous personalities in early Chinese history.

③ See *Shun-te hsien chih* 1853:18/43a. This particular gazetteer was compiled by Liang himself, which perhaps explains why Lin Tse-hsü's inscription is quoted in full. Lin's colophon also describes sympathetically the father's pain at his younger daughter's decision to remain unmarried in order to care for her paternal grandmother, Liang T'ing-nan's widowed mother.

her skill in martial arts to kill pirates. This is the daughter of Chou Wei-teng 周維登, who learned boxing from her father.<sup>34</sup> Stories like Chou's served as a counterpoint to tales of literary talent, underscoring the fact that genteel ladies learn the civil arts, befitting their residence in civilized centers of high culture.

On the other hand, some gazetteers neglect their most distinguished female writers. For example, the Hsiang-shan gazetteer of 1828 gives barely a nod to Liu Yuan-hua 劉苑華, author of a distinguished collection of poetry that was listed in the Monographs on Literature in the Ming History, even though one authority on letters called her "the only talented person in her entire native place."<sup>35</sup> Perhaps influenced by the Chu Hsi tradition celebrated in Huang Tso's *Mu hsun*, the gazetteer pays only cursory attention to women writers, preferring to celebrate women's other virtues. The only work by a woman featured in the gazetteer is a collection of poems in a single *chüan*, selected for posthumous publication by a relative of an exemplary widow who supported herself by teaching girls for more than twenty years after her husband's death.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, in most gazetteers of the region, we see a similar concern for establishing the proper cultural meaning of a woman's published poetry. For instance Shen Te-ch'ien 沈德潛, composing a preface to the collected poems of Fang Chieh 方潔, was careful to call upon a precedent set by the eminent Sung scholar and statesman Ou-yang Hsiu 歐陽修. In a preface to the poems of Hsieh Hsi-meng 謝希孟, Ou-yang had observed that Hsieh's poetry was simple but laden with meaning, written with the modesty and restraint of a young girl, in a language "utterly unlike that

<sup>34</sup> *Shun-te hsien chih* 1853:29/21b.

<sup>35</sup> See Hu Wen-k'ai 1985:193, quoting the *Kuang-yü chi* 廣輿記; also *Hsiang-shan hsien chih* 1828:8/37a.

<sup>36</sup> See Ho Ch'i-ying's 何其英 preface to the collected poems of Mai Yu-kuei 麥又桂, which he edited and published in 1822; quoted in *Hsiang-shan hsien chih* 1828:8/37a.

of a married woman.” Ou-yang Hsiu attributed Hsieh’s pure writing voice to her mother’s instruction, which had joined her love of learning to a comprehensive knowledge of the classics. Shen, echoing Ou-yang Hsiu, praised Fang Chieh’s work by invoking her parents’ erudition, while likening the quality of her poetry to Hsieh Hsi-meng’s.<sup>37</sup> In this way he was able to place the woman’s talent in an appropriate context, by associating it with the luster of her family’s scholarly reputation. This had the effect of drawing attention away from Fang’s individual talent and toward her respectable Confucian virtues, such as her capacity to carry on the tradition of her ancestors.

In sum, gazetteer biographies reveal that how Confucian family values provided a context in which women’s talent could be legitimized. At the same time, talented women and their literary activities rubbed against the grain of the structures of power in the grand family. The image of the *ts’ai-nü* therefore invites a fresh analysis of the workings of the Chinese family system, to probe more closely those points where women’s talent can be nurtured and flourish.

### Problematizing the “patriarchal family”

The figure of the *ts’ai-nü* forces us to acknowledge an important and contradictory feature of the late imperial Chinese family. That is, despite the extraordinary scope for gender bias in the Chinese grand family system, the same family system could not only accommodate but could actually nurture women as expressive, writing subjects. In writings about talented women, several prominent story lines emerge, which can be briefly outlined as follows:

<sup>37</sup> *P’an-yü hsien chih* 1871:27/35a-b. On Hsieh’s poetry, see Hu Wen-k’ai 1985: 65-66, where Ou-yang Hsiu’s preface is quoted more fully.

1. Daughters may be educated alongside their brothers as toddlers and as little girls. At the age when siblings must be segregated by sex, girls may be taught at home by father, mother, elder female relatives (sisters, cousins, aunts), or a governess hired for that purpose. By age seven, the most precocious girls will be composing their first poems. Such girls in their mid-teens may be writing poetry to rival the best work of their male literati elders.

2. Women may be educated for the same reasons that men are educated: to fully realize their moral and intellectual potential. In addition, women are educated to provide the best possible early childhood guidance for their children. A further benefit of educating women is to lend them authority and wisdom in managing servants and household affairs, and in advising their husbands and other male relatives.

3. Fathers dote on daughters; uncles dote on nieces; and well educated men generally dote on their sisters and female cousins, and, in some cases, their wives. In other words, many, if not most, of women's most meaningful emotional and intellectual relationships are formed in the bosom of the natal family and endure as a source of emotional sustenance and literary inspiration throughout life.

4. A daughter's erudition should be flaunted, not hidden. Her brushes and inkstones, and even in some cases carved woodblocks for printing her writings, may be part of her dowry.

5. A wife who had achieved mastery of the practical and moral knowledge conveyed in a sound Confucian education would be the anchor of her spouse's professional success, the primary support of her aging parents-in-law, the mentor of younger women in her household, and a role model for her children, male or female.

How did the *ts'ai-nü* find a home in this "patriarchal" family? In particular, where should we look for emotionally and intellectually sustain-

ing relationships between men and women? Rarely, it seems, to sons or husbands. This makes sense when we consider the particular constraints the late imperial Chinese family system imposed on male-female relations. The most stressful points – those relationships between men and women that were most fraught – were relationships between husbands and wives, and sons and mothers. These relationships mark the points where women crossed the boundaries of the patrilineal family system, in marriage and in reproduction; they are also the points on which “feminist” scholarship on China has hitherto trained its lens).

It follows, then, that if we are looking for relationships that nurtured the *ts'ai-nü* in the Chinese family system, we should look first to fathers and brothers. As G. William Skinner has pointed out, the Chinese father who had to be his sons' sternest disciplinarian could indulge his daughters to the hilt.<sup>38</sup> This explains the doting paternal figures hovering in the background of so many *ts'ai-nü* biographies. Father not only paid for a tutor, or encouraged his wife to tutor his girls; Father saw to the task himself whenever he got a chance – and bragged about it. Daughters started their studies side by side with their brothers, and this, we might imagine, was the beginning of ties of companionship and affection that kept brothers and sisters in touch long after the trauma of marriage had pulled them apart. These, in other words, are the points at which the Chinese “patriarchal” family system bent to make room for the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual development of the young girls who became *ts'ai-nü*. We could imagine, then, that the best possible odds for growing up a *ts'ai-nü* in Qing times were to be born to well-off parents of many

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<sup>38</sup> See, *inter alia*, G. William Skinner, “‘Seek a Loyal Subject in a Filial Son’: Family Roots of Political Orientation in Chinese Society.” In Institute of Modern History, ed., *Family Process and Political Process in Chinese Society* (Nankang, Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1992), vol. 2, pp. 959-962.

daughters and few sons, with the sons coming later than the daughters. Daughters in such families received the maximum in paternal indulgence, and sons the maximum in sisterly affection.

Why did men in late imperial elite families need and admire *ts'ai-nü*? Partly because, in their heartless intellectual world, the *ts'ai-nü* offered a haven. Her poetry was the antithesis of men's sterile, formal writing. Her freedom from the pressures of capturing and holding office gave her a moral autonomy that men envied. As a daughter, she could be indulged at will, without fear that a lapse in discipline would compromise her chances for success in the examinations. As a daughter, her talents could be celebrated without the corrupting taint of ambition or fame-seeking. In both respects, a daughter gave a father's respite from pressures that constrained his relationship to his sons. As a sister, niece, or cousin, the *ts'ai-nü* offered men the intellectual and emotional intimacy that wives – eyes on the family purse and the ears tuned to the voice of a demanding mother-in-law – and mothers – eyes on the prize of their son's future titles – could rarely match.

The historical openings for the *ts'ai-nü* were not only of men's making. Mothers selecting a future daughter-in-law wished for refinement and erudition, the better to get the jump on an early education for their grandsons. Sisters copied brothers as they commenced their studies at ever earlier ages. Female mentors collected the poems of younger women, encouraged them to write, introduced them to friends, and saw that they got published. Indeed, we have some evidence that to be part of the social ambit of the upper-class female in the mid-Ch'ing period, a woman had to know how to discuss the classics over tea and embroidery. I need not add that a proper lady must be able to compose appropriate occasional verse for all social interactions.

## Conclusion

By paying attention to talented women, we learn something new and important about the range of possibilities for female roles in the Confucian grand family system. With this knowledge, we can ask new questions, such as the following: granted that the Chinese family system was conducive to an unusually severe gender bias, what conditions pulled the grand family system in the direction of greater gender equality? and under what historical circumstances did those conditions emerge?

The evidence in local gazetteers provides some preliminary answers. First, gender balance in upper-class Chinese families was most likely to emerge in the realm of education and learning; second, periods when educational opportunities became more widespread were periods when we would expect to see women's educational levels rising; third, the historical conditions promoting the spread of educational opportunities were closely linked to locality, notably to investments in libraries, in local academies, in teachers and private tutors, and in career success. All of this not to mention the investments in symbolic capital that made a family proud to boast of the educational achievements of daughters as well as sons.

On the other hand, because local gazetteers were compiled to represent the honor of every locality, women's education and talented women generally are given a particular reading by the editors, who prefer to stress their role in transmitting the learning of their families, in providing instruction for their sons and (occasionally) intellectual companionship for their spouses, and (still less frequently) in using their training to earn income from employment as governess or private tutor to upper-class young ladies. Only rarely do gazetteers quote or reprint poems by these women; rather, the editors prefer simply to list the titles of their collected

works in lieu of describing their art in detail. This means that in order to problematize our understanding of the workings of the grand family, we need to read these sources against the grain, searching for evidence of women as writing subjects, and using stories about them to trace their unique place in the culture of their time. It also means that standard sources such as gazetteers may not reveal the reasons why women writers were more prominent in one region than another. For answers to those questions, we will have to look elsewhere.