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## A HAUNTING VOICE: A PLACE FOR LITERARY WIVES IN THE HISTORY OF THE CIVIL EXAMINATIONS IN QING CHINA<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction: Women and the civil exam

From the Tang (618-906) Dynasty, the civil examination system was a modest mechanism to broaden the social base for recruiting talent and selecting officials. In the Song period (960-1279), due to the political consideration of the centrifugal power of regional clans and military leaders threatening the central authority, Emperor Taizu 太祖 (Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤, 927-976; r. 960-976) and Emperor Taizong 太宗 (Zhao Kuangyi 趙匡義, 939-997; r. 976-997) devoted themselves to establishing a government which was dominated by literati. In order to recruit scholar officials, the civil examination was further advocated as the measure of talent. Though the civil exam was systemized in the Tang Dynasty, it was not until the Song Dynasty that the Chinese society was transformed and dominated by scholar officials.<sup>2</sup> This cultural and social change was significant during the Tang-Song transition. It verified the decline of dominance by the aristocratic great clans in the Sui (581-618) Tang era, and the general public, restricted to males only, could upgrade their social status by studying and passing the civil exam.<sup>3</sup>

Until the Ming-Qing (1368-1912) era, passing the civil examination was an ideal goal deep-rooted in Chinese mind, since what followed the success was the gentry social status and official political position. In the absence of alternative careers of comparable social status and political prestige, becoming an official was the ultimate

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- 1 An earlier version of this paper entitled "A Haunting Voice: Was there a Place for Women in the History of the Civil Examinations in Qing China?" was presented at the "History Spring Symposium" held at the University of Hong Kong on May 7, 2009. This paper also forms a portion of my M. Phil. research on writings to and about husbands in anthologies of Qing women's works.
  - 2 According to several statistical researches, there were a total number of 6,656 *jinshi* degrees offered in the Tang period. In the Song Dynasty, the total number of *jinshi* degrees increased sharply to 39,711. See John Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 132-33; Benjamin Elman, *Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 648; Liu Haifeng 劉海峰 and Li Bing 李兵, *Zhonggou keju shi* 中國科舉史 (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2004), pp. 432-444.
  - 3 Peter Bol, *"This Culture of Ours": Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 32-75.

goal for educated males. Until the abolition of this system in 1905, the civil examination remained the main avenue to wealth and power in imperial China.<sup>4</sup> However, based on the fact that “throughout the late empire, the civil service competition remained a symbol of male supremacy in Confucian society,”<sup>5</sup> and “women could not sit for the examinations, and they had no opportunity to serve in office,”<sup>6</sup> the civil exam had never served as a direct avenue to wealth and power for women. A famous female poet in the Tang Dynasty Yu Xuanji 魚玄機 (844-868), once lamented being a woman and having no opportunity to attempt the exam, and that she could only “uselessly envy the names on the list” she saw.<sup>7</sup> Without actual participation in the civil exam, however,

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- 4 The civil examination was officially abolished in 1905 during the reign of *Guangxu* 光緒 (Aixinjueluo Zaitian 愛新覺羅載湉, 1871-1908; r. 1874-1908). According to the *Qing shilu* 清實錄, starting from the year of *bingwu* (1906), all provincial and metropolitan exams stopped; triennial exams in all provinces stopped too. See *Dezong jinghuangdi shilu* 德宗景皇帝實錄 (collected in *Qing shilu* [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985-1987], vol. 59) *juan* 548, “Guangxu sanshiyinian bayue yisi 光緒三十一年八月乙巳” (the yisi day in the eighth moon of Guangxu 31st year; Sept. 3, 1905), p. 273. Previous scholars have conducted fruitful studies on the civil examination; they have paid attention not only to its political and institutional construction, but also to its social and cultural significance. Ho Ping-ti emphasized the degree of social mobility in relevance to the examination system in one of his masterpieces, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1962). Some scholars have adopted various approaches to illustrate the Chinese civil examination from sociological and psycho-historical perspectives. For instance Ichisada Miyazaki explored the types, style and form of questions which candidates in the Qing period were to answer, and also emphasized the psychological and financial burdens of the candidates. See Ichisada Miyazaki (trans. Conrad Schirokauer), *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). John Chafee sought to delineate the relationship between education and examinations. In addition, he tried to explain how the civil examination was integrated into Chinese culture by investigating various sources, such as official documents, scholars' writings, popular stories, portents and myths. See John Chafee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*. Contrary to earlier studies of Chinese social mobility, Iona Man-Cheong believed that examinations did not only adopt a gatekeeper function. She suggested that social elites did not depend on the state for their actual existence, but they needed the throne to acknowledge their political leadership. Examination, in Man's view, was functioning as the legitimation and the reproduction of the symbiotic and asymmetrical relationship between the throne and the educated elites. See Iona D. Man-Cheong, *The Class of 1761: Examinations, State, and Elites in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).
  - 5 Benjamin A. Elman, “Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examination in Late Imperial China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1 (Feb. 1991), p. 17.
  - 6 Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 78.
  - 7 The original text is “Jutou kongxian bangzhongming 舉頭空羨榜中名” (look up, I uselessly envy the names on the list I see). See Yu Xuanji, “You Chongzhenguan nanlou, du xinji timingchu 遊崇真觀南樓, 睹新及第題名處” (Seeing the new listing of successful degree candidates), in her *Tang nǚlang Yu Xuanji shiji* 唐女郎魚玄機詩集 (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1999), 5a. For English translation, see Bannie Chow & Thomas Cleary, *Autumn Willows: Poetry by Women of China's Golden Age* (Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 2003), p. 83.

women were not totally banished from the historical scene in this topic of discussion.<sup>8</sup> Surrounding the discussions of women and the civil exam, previous scholarship did touch on topics like the ephemeral establishment of the civil examination for women (*nüshi* 女試) during the Taiping era (1851-1864),<sup>9</sup> the images of female licentiates (*nüxiucai* 女秀才), female scholars (*nüxueshi* 女學士) as well as female optimi portrayed in Ming-Qing fiction;<sup>10</sup> and romance between examination candidates and courtesans.<sup>11</sup> In this study, I propose to investigate women's writings about the civil exams, particularly those addressed to their husbands who were exam candidates, in order to delineate the place for literary wives in the history of the civil examination. I

- 8 In fact, there are an increasing number of studies around the topic of women and the civil exam. For example, Kao Fon 高峰's *Kakyo to jousei* 科挙と女性 (Okayama: Daigaku Kyōiku Shuppan, 2004) is a relatively comprehensive study. It is translated in Chinese as *Keju yu nüxing: Wenxin yu aichou* 科舉與女性: 溫馨與哀愁 (Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 2007). In addition, Chen Jinfeng 陳金鳳, Liang Jing 梁琮 and Ma Jueping 馬珏珩 pay attention to the correlation of women and the civil exam, though Ma uses a fictional case to illustrate his argument. See Chen Jineng and Liang Jing, "Tangdai funü yu keju shulun 唐代婦女與科舉述論," *Lishi jiaoxue* 歷史教學 (Gaoxiaoban 高校版), 2007, no. 9 (Sep. 2007), pp. 29-33; Ma Jueping, "'Shidianou' nüxing yu keju guanxi lun 石點頭女性與科舉關係論," *Mingqing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, 2007, no. 3 (Sep. 2007), pp. 117-122.
- 9 See Luo Ergang 羅爾綱, "Taiping tianguo kai 'nüke'shi tantao 太平天國開女科事探討," *Xueshu yuekan* 學術月刊, 1984, no. 7 (Jul. 1984), pp. 36-43; Xu Mengyu 許夢虞, "Taiping tianguo nüke wenti chutan 太平天國女科問題初探," *Lishi jiaoxue* 歷史教學, 1987, no. 2 (Feb. 1982), pp. 21-25. This attempt has been interpreted as a fleeting taste of gender equality for women, in which Fu Shanxiang 傅善祥 (c.1830-?) became the only female optimi (*nüzhuangyuan* 女狀元) throughout Chinese history. For life details of Fu Shanxiang, see Mao Jiaqi, "Fu Shanxiang," in Clara Wing-chung Ho (ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: the Qing Period, 1644-1911* (New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1998; Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1999), pp. 43-45. Also, there is a monograph focusing on women and the Taiping society. See Liao Sheng 廖勝, *Funü yu taiping tianguo shehui* 婦女與太平天國社會 (Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 2007). However, I cannot access this book at this moment and thus cannot determine if there is any content discussing women's participation in the civil exam. See Chen Weibin 沈渭濱, "Lishi yanjiu de xitongguan he fangfalun — Dui Liao Sheng xiansheng shixue zheshu Funü yu taiping tianguo shehui de yizhong chanshi 歷史研究的系統觀和方法論——對廖勝先生史學著述《婦女與太平天國社會》的一種闡釋," *Mianyang shifan xueyuan xuebao* 綿陽師範學院學報, vol. 26 (Sep. 2007), pp. 147-149; Feng Yuan 馮源, "Jinru lishi de fangshi—Ping Liao Sheng xiansheng de xueshu zhuanzhe Funü yu taiping tianguo shehui 進入歷史的方式——評廖勝先生的學術專著《婦女與太平天國社會》," *Mianyang shifan xueyuan xuebao*, vol. 26 (Sep. 2007), pp. 150-154.
- 10 The images of female licentiates, female scholars as well as female optimi were often portrayed in Ming-Qing fiction. Through fictional creation, women were allowed to participate in the civil examination and to achieve official posts that they could never achieve in the real world. For details, see Liu Yongcong 劉詠聰, "Gudai wenxue zuopin zhong zhiqiu gongming de nüxing 古代文學作品中智取功名的女性," in her *Nüxing yu lishi: Zhongguo chuantong guannian xintan* 女性與歷史: 中國傳統觀念新探 (Hong Kong: Xianggang jiaoyu tushu gongsi, 1993), pp. 113-118; Gao Feng, *Keju yu nüxing: Wenxin yu aichou*, pp. 164-188.
- 11 Romance between examination candidates and courtesans is a frequently recurring theme when discussing women and the civil examination. Beverly Bossler, "Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 62, no. 1 (Jun. 2002), pp. 5-37; Gao Feng, *Keju yu nüxing*, pp. 47-79.



attempt to address the following questions: In what capacity did women participate in the culture of the civil exam as reflected in their writings? What insights can be gained about women's agency and subjectivity from their active expression of their thoughts towards the exam? How would the history of the civil examination be revised if the position of women was taken into account?

With an increasing rediscovery of anthologies and collected works authored by women in the Qing period, current scholars have been trying to venture into these primary materials to explore different themes about women and gender in imperial China.<sup>12</sup> While integrating a gender perspective into the study of imperial Chinese history has recently become a flourishing attempt in academic research, very few scholarly works have investigated women's writings to explore their direct attitudes towards the civil exam or the exam candidates. A leading scholar Benjamin A. Elman's study on a cultural history of civil examinations is a groundbreaking work and has elicited heated discussion on the topic. One of his focuses about the emotional anxiety of examination candidates offers a basis for my discussion in this article.<sup>13</sup> According to Elman, "the anxiety produced by examinations was a historical phenomenon, which was experienced most personally and deeply by boys and men, given the gender ideology of their patriarchal society. Fathers and mothers, sisters and extended relatives, were not immune to this anxiety. They shared in the experience and offered comfort, solace and encouragement."<sup>14</sup> In fact, family members, particularly female relatives like mothers, sisters, and wives, held an important place in providing spiritual support to examination

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12 Scholars in the field of gender history and Chinese literature have paid much attention to writing women in late imperial China. Their scholarly works have opened an insightful path for studying topics related to literary women. For details, see Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994); Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*; Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang (eds.), *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997); Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy (eds.), *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999); Zhang Hongsheng 張宏生 (ed.), *Ming-Qing wenxue yu xingbie yanjiu* 明清文學與性別研究 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2002); Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004); Grace S. Fong, *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

13 Benjamin A. Elman, *Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, pp. 295-370.

14 Benjamin A. Elman, *Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, p. 296. In an earlier study, T'ien Ju-k'ang attempts to correlate male anxiety and female chastity, and argues that the increase in widow suicide was caused by male anxiety inspired by the examination system. See his *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Chinese Ethical Values in Ming-Ching Times* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1988). However, Paul S. Ropp's critical reviews emphasize that "it would seem that frustration over the examination was only one among many factors producing such anxiety" see Paul S. Ropp, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 3 (Aug. 1989), pp. 605-606. For another informative review, see Susan Mann, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1 (Jun. 1992), pp. 362-369.

candidates.<sup>15</sup> By investigating their writings, this paper concentrates on delineating how literary wives provided persistent mental support to their spouses. To better illustrate the different mental support depicted in wives' works, I attempt to group their composing occasions into three categories, including farewells for the exam, consolation for failure and congratulations for success. Through an exploration of the sources, this study aims at catching a glimpse of the invisible place of literary wives, and providing a broader view of the history of the civil examination in Qing China.

### Farewells for the examination

"In late imperial China, no successful elite man remained at home: he had to travel."<sup>16</sup> In reality, men traveled for a number of reasons, for example teaching, attending school, sitting for the exam, and taking up an official post. Among them, sitting for the civil

15 For example, mothers were inclined to use a serious tone to encourage their sons. For instance Gan Lirou 甘立嫻 (1743-1891) repeatedly reminded her son in "Jidong Tianer fu bu huishi kouyin mianzhu 季冬田兒赴部會試口吟勉囑" (Encourage and advise my son Tian before he leaves for the exam) and "Linxing youzhu 臨行又囑" (Advise again before leaving), in her *Yongxuelou gao* 詠雪樓稿 (Xuxintianbanjiezhai edition, 1843), *juan* 3, 32a. Liang Lanyi 梁蘭漪 (1727-?) saw her son off and composed "Song Duaner Zhenzhou xiaoshi 送端兒真州小試" (Seeing my son Duan off to sit for the exam in Zhenzhou), in her *Wanxianglou shiji* 晚香樓詩集 (Feihong ge shulin edition, 1895), *juan* 1, 19a-19b. In fact, recent scholarship has paid much attention to the mothers' role of instructing their sons. Clara Wing-chung Ho focuses on how mothers' writing reflects their wishes for sons' success in the civil exam. Ho also cites an example of a mother composing model exam answers for her son. See her "Qingdai nüxing kezishu juyao 清代女性課子書學要," in *Donghai zhongwen xuebao* 東海中文學報, vol. 20 (Jul. 2008), pp. 187-216. In her discussion of motherhood, Li Guotong 李國彤 emphasizes the interaction between the examination culture and family culture, that an honorable mother should act as educator of her son. See her "In Quest of Immortality: A Perspective of Chinese Women's History," *MingQing shi jikan* 明清史集刊, vol. 8 (Dec. 2005), pp. 203-220; "MingQing funü zhezuo de zeren yishi yu 'buxiu' guan 明清婦女著作中的責任意識與「不朽」觀," *Yanying xuebao* 燕京學報, vol. 20 (May 2006), pp. 55-77. For more discussion on mother and son relations, also see Hsiung Ping-chen 熊秉真, *Tongnian yiwang: Zhongguo haizi de lishi* 童年憶往: 中國孩子的歷史 (Taipei: Maitian chuban gufen youxian gongsi, 2000); Zhong Huiling 鍾慧玲, "Qidai, jiazuo chuancheng yu ziwo chengxian—Qingdai nüzuojia kexunshi de tantao 期待、家族傳承與自我呈現—清代女作家課訓詩的探討," in *Donghai zhongwen xuebao*, vol. 15 (Jul. 2003), pp. 177-204; Zhou Yuwen 周愚文 and Hong Renjin 洪仁進 (eds.), *Zhongguo chuantong funü yu jiating jiaoyu* 中國傳統婦女與家庭教育 (Taipei: Shida shuyuan, 2005). Besides, mental support to exam candidates was also provided by sisters, such as Yuan Shou 袁綬 (1794-1867?) "Song Youcun zhongdi fushi beiwei 送又村仲弟赴試北闈" (Seeing my second younger brother off to sit for the exam), in her *Yaohuaguo shicao* 瑤華閣詩草 (1867 edition), *juan* 1, 46a-46b; Zong Wan 宗婉 "Wei Yunshengdi xiaoshi shili 慰韻生弟小試失利" (Comforting my younger brother Yunsheng for failing the exam), in her *Mengxianglou shigao* 夢湘樓詩稿 (Changshou zongshi edition, 1880), *juanshang*, 11b; and Zhu Sizhao 朱嗣昭, "Song liangxiong fu shengshi 送兩兄赴省試" (Seeing my two elder brothers off to sit for the provincial exam), in Yun Zhu 惲珠 (1771-1833, ed.), *Guochao guixiu zhengshi xuji* 國朝閨秀正始續集 (Hongxiang guan edition, 1836), *juan* 10, 22a.

16 Susan Mann, "The Virtue of Travel for Women in the Late Empire," in Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson (eds.), *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), p. 55.



exam was an important event that required men all over the country to travel a long distance. On this occasion, they probably traveled alone and suffered from a prolonged separation from their family. Hence, writing to see husbands off for the exam became a natural practice for literary wives who stayed at home; poems entitled *songwai* 送外 (seeing my husband off) reflect this content best. Noticeably, in their writings affectionate wives usually articulated weeping because of the separation. For instance, in a *songwai* poem composed by Zhang Yin 張因, the author made use of the dreary environment to reflect her sadness. She expressed her lovesickness at her husband's departure and worried about his wellbeing during the journey. But Zhang was such a rational person that even in a sad mood she tried to hide her sadness and encouraged her husband by praising his talent. The last sentence was written in a serious tone. She warned her husband not to disparage any literary work.<sup>17</sup> Another piece of writing that exemplified a wife's sadness was written by Sun Caifu 孫采芙 (1825-1881) who sighed furtively because of the upcoming separation when packing luggage for her husband. Sun knew that the sad face in the mirror would be her only companion after her husband left home. However, similar to Zhang, Sun was confident to predict a successful result and to hope for holding "an announcement on paper embossed with gold" (*nijin* 泥金)<sup>18</sup>, which was a symbol of passing the civil examination in imperial China.<sup>19</sup> Xiang Lanzhen 項蘭貞 had a stirring of emotions when she thought of her husband Huang Xixi 黃外錫 who was away from home. With the absence of Huang, no one enjoyed the serene night scenery with her, even though the bright moon still shone on the old building as usual.<sup>20</sup> In her song lyrics, Yu Qingzeng 俞慶曾 sadly wept due to the separation with her husband Zong Shunnan 宗舜年 (1865-1933; style name Se'an 瑟庵). When Zong was away, she could only express her feelings to the wind besides her. She missed Zong passionately especially when holding his winter clothes. Though her sadness was hard to overcome, she wished Zong a safe trip and final success.<sup>21</sup>

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- 17 Zhang Yin, "Songwai fushi 送外赴試" (Seeing my husband off to sit for the exam), in Yun Zhu (ed.), *Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji* 國朝閨秀正始集 (Hongxiang guan edition, 1831), *juan* 16, 10a-10b. This poem was also entitled as "Song Qiuping fushi 送秋平赴試" (Seeing Qiuping off to sit for the exam), in which Qiuping was the style name of Zhang's husband Huang Wenyang 黃文暘 (1736-?). See Cai Dianqi 蔡殿齊 (ed.), *Guochao guige shichao* 國朝閨閣詩鈔 (1844 edition), *juan* 4, 40a-40b.
- 18 From the Tang Dynasty, successful exam candidates would receive the announcement on paper embossed with gold, which is known as *nijin* or *nijintie* 泥金帖 in Chinese. See Wang Renyu 王仁裕, *Kaiyuan Tianbao yishi* 開元天寶遺事 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), p. 40.
- 19 Sun Caifu, "Song waizi Jinling yingju 送外子金陵應舉" (Seeing my husband off to sit for the exam in Jinling), in her *Congbixuan yigao* 叢筆軒遺藁 (Qingsizelou edition, 1887), *juan* 2, 2b.
- 20 Xiang Lanzhen, "Songwai fushi 送外赴試" (Seeing my husband off to sit for the exam), in Ji Xian 季嫻 (1614-1683, ed.), *Guixiu ji* 閨秀集 (collected in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書; Tainan: Zhuangyan wenhua shiye youxian gongsi, 1997, vol. 414, p. 372).
- 21 Yu Qingzeng, "Gao yang tai: Song Se'an ying chunguanshi 高陽臺: 送瑟庵應春官試" (Gao yang tai: Seeing Se'an off to sit for the spring term exam), in her *Xiumoxuan ci* 繡墨軒詞 (collected in Xu Naichang 徐乃昌 [1868-1943, ed.], *Xiaotanluan shi huike guixiu ci* 小檀樂室彙刻閨秀詞; Nanling Xushi edition, 1896), 4a.

As far as the notion that “muyi zigui; qiyi furong 母以子貴, 妻以夫榮” (a mother is valued because of her son; a wife is honored because of her husband) was deep-rooted in Chinese culture,<sup>22</sup> a man’s success in the civil exam directly impacted on the social status of his mother and wife. Therefore, offering optimistic encouragement was another main theme in women’s writing. Li Yurong 李玉容 composed an uplifting poem to support her husband. She affirmed her husband’s ambition to pursue scholarly honor and official rank, and also suggested he treasure every moment to make the best preparation.<sup>23</sup> In her writing “Songwai xiangshi 送外鄉試” (Seeing my husband off to sit for the county exam), Hu Fanglan 胡芳蘭 encouraged her husband to strive for a prosperous career in the future.<sup>24</sup> Besides, in order to avoid all unnecessary distractions from the exam, some wives were considerate and intelligent enough to guarantee fulfillment of family obligations. Yuan Exian 袁萼仙, who understood her husband’s filial concern, promised to take care of her parents-in-law amicably and asked him to concentrate on the exam.<sup>25</sup> In fact, it had become a steadfast conception to link examination success with filial piety in imperial China,<sup>26</sup> and since only males were eligible to participate in the exam, they bore the duty to gratify their parents. For that reason, exam candidates strived not only for their own career in officialdom, but also for the family honor. So, as an adherent of Confucian-learning, Gan Lirou did not forget to remind her husband, even in the last sentence of her writing, that he should gratify his parents by passing the exam.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, inspiring confidence was one of the most direct forms of encouragement. Qian Huizhen 錢慧貞 boosted her husband’s morale by praising his literary talent in an affirmative tone, which would certainly have served as a catalyst for the exam candidate to strive for success.<sup>28</sup>

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- 22 The phrase “muyi zigui, qiyi furong” means that when a son or a husband obtains a high social status, his mother and wife will be honored. For the former part of this phrase, see Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764-1849, ed.), *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), *Chunqiu gongyang zhuan* 春秋公羊傳, p. 2197. The later part can also be phrased as “fugui qirong 夫貴妻榮” or “fuzun qirong 夫尊妻榮,” see Ruan Yuan (ed.), *Shisanjing zhushu*, *Yili* 儀禮, p. 1109.
- 23 Li Yurong, “Songwai zhi Wuchang yingju 送外之武昌應舉” (Seeing my husband off to sit for the exam in Wuchang), in Deng Xiahe 鄧顯鶴 (1778-1851, ed.), *Yuan xiang qi jiuji* 沅湘耆舊集 (collected in *Xuxiu siki quanshu* 續修四庫全書; Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), *juan* 180, 4b.
- 24 Hu Fanglan, “Songwai xiangshi,” in Huang Zhimo 黃秩模 (ed.), *Guochao guixiu shi liuxu ji* 國朝閨秀詩柳絮集 (Jiaoyin xiaohuang edition, 1853), *juan* 7, 4b.
- 25 Yuan Exian, “Songwai Jinling qiushi 送外金陵秋試” (Seeing my husband off to sit for the autumn term exam in Jinling), in Huang Zhimo (ed.), *Guochao guixiu shi liuxu ji*, *juan* 7, 9a.
- 26 Benjamin A. Elman, “Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China,” p. 15.
- 27 Gan Lirou, “Song fuzi shengshi 送夫子省試” (Seeing my husband off to sit for the provincial exam), in her *Yongxuelou gao*, *juan* 2, 10a.
- 28 Qian Huizhen, “Shui diao ge tou: Songwai zhi Jinling yingshi 水調歌頭: 送外之金陵應試” (Shui diao ge tou: Seeing my husband off to sit for the exam in Jinling), in Xu Naichang (ed.), *Guixiu cichao* 閩秀詞鈔 (Xiaotanluan shi edition, 1909), *juan* 7, 24b-25a.

Besides offering encouragement, presenting blessings in a warm and gentle manner was also commonly found in women's writings. In Chinese culture, the laurel (*guizhi* 桂枝) was a metaphor of victory, representing success in the civil examination.<sup>29</sup> Many women, therefore, blessed their husbands for taking the laurel back. One of the examples was Fan Yuxiu 范毓秀, who drank wine and gave a willow branch to her husband as present, wishing that the willow branch would become a laurel on the day he returned home.<sup>30</sup> Gan Lirou presented quite a similar blessing in one of her song lyrics. She gave confidence to her husband by praising his talent and asking him to bring a laurel back.<sup>31</sup> An affectionate wife, who was full of hope, she embroidered a laurel on the fan holder for her husband to wish for his complete success in the exam.<sup>32</sup> In addition, poems with touching marital sentiments can also be seen in women's work. For example, Jin Yi 金逸 (1770-1794) showed conflicting feelings in her poem presented to her husband Chen Ji 陳基 (1771-1845, z. Zhushi 竹士). On the one hand, she was happy when dreaming of Chen's success; on the other hand, she was grieved when thinking of Chen's departure from home. Jin explicitly confessed to Chen that her heart would follow him no matter how far they were apart.<sup>33</sup> Noticeably, farewells for the examination were only one of the occasions in which wives' encouragement could be shown. Soon after the exam, unsuccessful candidates received consolation as well as further encouragement from their spouses, which is the next focus that I will discuss.

### Consolation for failure

According to Frederic Wakeman and Miyazaki Ichisada's statistical research, only one in six thousand (0.01percent) candidates succeeded in passing all stages of the

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- 29 The word *guizhi* is the abbreviation of *guilin yizhi* 桂林一枝. Recorded in the *Jinshu* 晉書 "Wei tianxia diyi, huo guilin yizhi 爲天下第一, 獲桂林之一枝" (only the one who ranks the first is awarded a laurel), *guizhi* was used as a metaphor to represent those who achieved success in the exam. See Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (579-648), *Jinshu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), *juan* 52, "liezhuan" 22, "Xi Shen zhuan 郤詵傳," p. 1443. Another phrase *guizheyizhi* 桂折一枝 conveys a similar meaning. In a poem by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846), there are sentences mentioning "Guilin yizhi xian xuwo, yangchuan sanye jin jingren 桂林一枝先許我, 楊穿三葉盡驚人," which means success in the exam as well. See Bai Juyi, "Xi Minzhing jidi oushi suohuai 喜敏中及第偶示所懷," in his *Bai Juyi ji* 白居易集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), p. 416. Thereafter, words such as *guizhi* and *zhogui* 折桂 are frequently used to represent success in the exam.
- 30 Fan Yuxiu, "Qiuri songwai yingshi Jinling 秋日送外應試金陵" (On an autumn day, seeing my husband off to sit for the exam in Jinling), in Yun Zhu (ed.), *Guochao guixiu zhengshi xuji*, *juan* 7, 12b.
- 31 Gan Lirou, "Lan gan wan li xin: Songwai yingshi 闌干萬里心: 送外應試" (Lan gan wan li xin: Seeing my husband off to sit for the exam), in her *Yongxuelou gao*, *juan* 5, 14a.
- 32 Anonymous, "Xiu shannang songfu xiangshi 綉扇囊送夫鄉試" (To embroider a fan holder, seeing my husband off for the county exam), in Guang Tiefu 光鐵夫(ed.), *Anhui mingyuan shici zhenglie* 安徽名媛詩詞徵略 (Hefei: Huangshan shushe; Anhuisheng xinhua shudian, 1986), p. 294.
- 33 Jin Yi 金逸, "Song Zhushi fushi 送竹士赴試" (Seeing Zhushi off to sit for the exam), in Cai Dianqi (ed.), *Guochao guige shichao*, *juan* 7, 24a-24b.

examination by 1850, including the provincial exam, the metropolitan exam and the palace exam.<sup>34</sup> Hence, an extremely large proportion of the candidates would have to experience the bitterness of failure, followed by frustration and discouragement. Thus, many literary women attempted to compose poems of consolation, usually in an optimistic manner. By comparing the humble experience with that of famous predecessors, it was heartening enough to assuage their husbands' mental trauma of failing the exam. Xi Peilan 席佩蘭 (1762-1820?) consoled her husband Sun Yuanxiang 孫原湘 (1760-1829) by comparing him with the two eminent Tang Dynasty poets, Li Bai 李白 (710-762) and Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770). As Xi mentioned, even those as talented as Li and Du, "failed in their own lifetimes to make a name for themselves in the exams." Therefore, merit and fame gained from passing the exam was certainly less meaningful than preserving one's talent. And it was obvious that "since ancient times sages and worthies have emerged from the poor and lowly."<sup>35</sup> The attitudes of Qiu Zhaoxi 邱肇錫 and Xi were very alike. Qiu did not specifically refer to any historical figures, but brilliantly pointed out the fact that every sage had undergone prolonged austerity and mortification before their success.<sup>36</sup> Both Xi and Qiu articulated thoughtful appreciation of their husbands' literary talent and confidently believed that their talent would finally be recognized by others. In fact, this type of expression was very frequently seen in women's writing. For instance, Peng shi 彭氏 (wife of Wang Zongyang 汪宗揚) used the most common metaphors in Chinese culture, the thousand-mile-horse (*qianlima* 千里馬) which meets Bole 伯樂 to illustrate this idea.<sup>37</sup> Liao shi 廖氏 (wife of Yu Shuyuan 余樞元) utilized farming as an analogy to describe her husband's endeavors, and emphasized the certainty of his success.<sup>38</sup> Noticeably, the above examples revealed the positive attitude of literary wives. They considerately consoled their husbands with an affirmative tone, which could probably have assuaged their emotional tension.

34 Frederic Jr. Wakeman, *The Fall of Imperial China* (New York: Free Press, 1975), pp. 21-23; Miyazaki Ichisada, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, pp. 121-122.

35 Xi Peilan, "Fuzi baoba gui shi yi weizhi 夫子報罷歸詩以慰之" (A poem to comfort my husband upon his return home after failing the examination), in her *Changzhenge ji* 長真閣集 (Qiangshi nangao caolu edition, 1891), *juan* 1, 7a-7b. For the English translation of this poem, see Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, pp. 601-603.

36 Qiu Zhaoxi, "Wei fu 慰夫" (Comforting my husband), in Huang Zhimo (ed.), *Guochao guixiu shi liuxu ji*, *juan* 33, 6a.

37 Peng shi, "Waizi Duanqiu shengshi buyu shi yi weizhi 外子端求省試不遇詩以慰之" (Comforting my husband for failing the provincial exam), in Huang Zhimo (ed.), *Guochao guixiu shi liuxu ji*, *juan* 31, 3b. The thousand-mile-horse (*qianlima*), a horse which runs a thousand miles a day, is used to describe talented people. Bole is the one who has the ability to recognize the potential of the thousand-mile-horse, is a metaphor of the one who appreciates people's talent. For the original story, see Han Fei 韓非, *Han Fei zi* 韓非子 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1996), p. 103.

38 Liao shi, "Waizi yingshi bagui shi yi mianzhi 外子應試罷歸詩以慰之" (Comforting my husband upon his return home after failing the exam), in Huang Zhimo (ed.), *Guochao guixiu shi liuxu ji*, *juan* 45, 28a.

On the other hand, some wives were inclined to comfort their husbands in a soft and gentle manner. They expressed thoughtfulness and understanding of their husbands' feelings and were no longer putting pressure on them. In "Weiwai慰外" (Comforting my husband), Zheng Fen鄭芬 recalled her husband's memories of the unsophisticated lives they used to have, and so it was worthless to delight in glory and be depressed in disgrace in a relatively relaxed tone. She reminded her husband of the normality of encountering failure.<sup>39</sup> This kind of attitude clearly demonstrated a different value from the cases mentioned above. Another example was Han *shi* 韓氏 (wife of Liu劉) who was even more magnanimous and open-minded. She urged Liu to throw away all the sadness by enjoying a simple life, such as appreciating the natural beauty of flowers, having a drink after sleeping and playing chess when in the mood to enjoy it. She asked her husband not to worry about the changing world and unpredictable future but to grasp every happy moment to laugh.<sup>40</sup> Similar to Han, Zeng Yan 曾彥 (1857-1890) consoled her husband Zhang Xiangling 張祥齡 (1853-1903, z. Zifu 子馥) with a mild tone by yearning for a simple life. She stressed that being an official to manage governmental affairs was nothing better than farming and planting in the countryside. She was reconciled to Zhang's failure, which showed the opposite value to those who thirsted for success.<sup>41</sup>

Hence, it is worth noticing that there were diverse attitudes among women regarding their husbands' career development. As mentioned above, women had no chance to sit for the civil exam no matter how talented they were, and it was difficult for women to ameliorate their life or be promoted to a higher social status on their own. They mostly gained their honor, fame and wealth from their male relatives, especially husbands and sons who passed the exam. Therefore, women's eagerness concerning the exam was actually an expression of their values and ideology regarding the matter of social mobility. Some women like Xi Peilan, Qiu Zhaoxi, Peng *shi* and Liao *shi* were eager for their husbands' success, and they confidently enlivened their husbands' spirits to try again after failure. This type of optimistic consolation was undoubtedly encouraging for exam candidates to strive again. In contrast, some women treated exam failure with ease. Some of them even thought that official posts were nothing important while the best lifestyle was to adapt to reality and to have a peaceful mind all the time. The examples of Zheng Fen, Han *shi* and Zeng Yan have already illustrated this attitude. Therefore, it is an interesting fact that not every woman was eager for upgrading their social status and pursuing affluent living, though they were encompassed by the tight ideology of the importance of passing the civil exam.

39 Zheng Fen, "Weiwai," in Huang Zhimo (ed.), *Guochao guixiu shi liuxu ji*, juan 45, 21a.

40 Han *shi*, "Weiwai 慰外" (Comforting my husband), in Huang Zhimo (ed.), *Guochao guixiu shi liuxu ji*, juan 41, 3b.

41 Zeng Yan, "Qianyou yizunjiu xing jiwei Zifu 前有一樽酒行寄慰子馥" (Comforting Zifu with a bottle of wine), in Xu Shichang 徐世昌 (1855-1939, ed.), *Wanqingyi shihui* 晚晴簃詩匯 (collected in *Xuxiu siki quanshu*), juan 192, 11b-12a.

### Congratulations for success

“Shinian chuangxia wuren wen, yiju chengming tianxia zhi 十年窗下無人問，一舉成名天下知” (No one bothers you when you are under the window for ten years; everyone knows your name once you achieve success).<sup>42</sup> Almost every literati and their family members dreamt of passing the civil exam. On the day of announcing the result, receiving an announcement on paper embossed with gold was an indication of success. Hence, most wives of successful candidates were fervent to capture this joyful moment in their literary works, despite that fact that writings on this occasion were relatively small in number. In fact, women’s responses to the successful result were very alike. They were full of excitement and contentment when congratulating their husbands. Those who were foresighted wished their husbands further success in the subsequent stages of the civil exam. For instance, in the first half of the song lyrics “Shao nian you: Xiwai xiangjie 少年遊：喜外鄉捷” (Shao nian you: Delighted with my husband’s success in the county exam), Chu Hui 儲慧 sighed because of her illness and longed for her husband’s examination result. This sharply contrasted with the second half when she received the successful announcement. She was excited, and thus blessed her husband for further success in the following metropolitan exam.<sup>43</sup> Another poet Zhu Yu 朱嶼 remarked about her annoying sickness to contrast with the stimulating result. Besides wishing for further success, she acclaimed that her husband’s success was a gratification to her parents-in-law, and most importantly a glory to the entire family.<sup>44</sup> Obviously, the emphasis on gratifying parents and honoring the family was a frequently recurring theme in women’s writing related to the civil examination. The examples mentioned on the occasions of farewells and consolation have already illustrated how wives refer to their parents-in-law in order to encourage and comfort their husbands. Perceivably, this theme was also applicable on the occasion of expressing congratulations.

Another example is Xi Peilan who wrote “Hewai shengshi baojie 賀外省試報捷” (Congratulating my husband’s success in the provincial exam) to congratulate her husband Sun after she confirmed his success in the provincial examination. She depicted in detail the joyful moment of receiving the result and then recalled Sun’s failure in the past to contrast with his success at that moment. She thought of her late parents-in-law who treated Sun to a banquet when Sun failed in the exam. It was so unexpected that a comforting joke she made in the past had turned into a happy omen, so that Sun could finally pass the examination.<sup>45</sup> Later when Sun passed the metropolitan exam, Xi again

42 By searching the electronic version of *Yingyin Wenyuange siku quanshu* 景印文淵閣四庫全書 and “Zhongguo jiben gujiku 中國基本古籍庫” (<http://www.ersjk.com>), one can come to realize that this phrase became popular during the Yuan, Ming and Qing (1271-1912) periods. A comparatively early record of the phrase was found in Liu Qi 劉祁 (1203-1259)’s *Guiqianzhi* 歸潛志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), vol. 7, p. 74.

43 Chu Hui, “Shao nian you: Xiwai xiangjie,” in her *Oyuelou shiyu* 哦月樓詩餘 (collected in *Xiaotianluan shi huike guixiu ci*), 3a-3b.

44 Zhu Yu, “Xiwai qiuwei baojie 喜外秋闈報捷” (Delighted with my husband’s success in the autumn term exam), in Shan Shili 單士釐 (1856-1943, ed.), *Qing guixiu zhengshi zaixuji chubian* 清閨秀正始再續集初編 (Gui’an qianshi edition), *juan* 6, 20b.

45 Xi Peilan, “Hewai shengshi baoji,” in her *Changzhenge ji*, *juan* 3, 11a-11b.



sent Sun her congratulations. At that time, Sun had already passed the provincial as well as the metropolitan level, and since he ranked second in both exams, Xi made fun of Sun by emphasizing that he was always ranked number two in exams. Finally, Xi sincerely wished Sun would proceed to a higher position.<sup>46</sup> The Xi and Sun case vividly exemplified how a literary wife provided mental support to her spouse persistently. The couple experienced failure and success, shared frustration as well as happiness together, which suitably illustrated a typical example of companionate marriage in imperial China.<sup>47</sup>

After expressing congratulations, some wives were eager to urge for their husbands' return. For instance Guo Runyu 郭潤玉 was surprised to receive the delayed announcement of her husband's successful result. She then praised him, claiming that he was as talented as Li Bai, and affirmed his valuable social status. After that, Guo reminded her husband of his extended departure from home and candidly pressed for his return.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps urging their husband home was somehow an indirect form of expressing lovesickness. After receiving the successful news, Liang Desheng 梁德繩 (1771-1847) was excited to congratulate her husband. She frankly told her husband that the mid-autumn festival was a time for family reunion, and thus sincerely wished for his return.<sup>49</sup>

Undoubtedly, passing the civil examination was the most ideal goal for literati in imperial China. However, regarding the fact that many candidates spent almost their whole life on taking and failing the exam, it generated a lot of emotional tension, disappointment as well as despair among them. Although wives' spiritual support was one way to relieve their emotional tension, it is not feasible to estimate the extent of

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46 Xi Peilan, "Zixiao yimao shengshi dier jin jie Nangong ren zuo dierren shi yi jihe bing zhu zhuangtuo 子瀟乙卯省試第二今捷南宮仍作第二人詩以寄賀并祝狀頭" (Zixiao ranked second in the yimiao provincial exam; this time he also ranked second in the palace exam; I compose to send him congratulations), in her *Changzhenge ji*, *juan* 6, 1b.

47 Xiao Yanwan 蕭燕婉 has already used Xi and Sun as a case study of companionate marriage. She gathered their writings composed for each other to illustrate how intellectual couples communicated through literature. See her *Shindai no josei shijintachi: En Bai no on'nadeshi tenbyō* 清代的女性詩人たち: 袁枚の女弟子点描 (Fukuoka-shi: Chūgoku Shoten, 2007), pp. 107-133. For further explanation of companionate marriage, see my "Li Shangzhang, Qian Yunsu heji suojian zhi fufu qingyi: Qingdai you'ai hunyin yili" 李尚璋、錢韞素合集所見之夫婦情誼: 清代友愛婚姻一例, *Journal of Chinese Studies* 中國文化研究所學報, vol. 50 (Jan. 2010), pp. 189-218. Also, it is believed that Xi encouraged Sun to study. In the preface of the *Tianzhenge ji* 天真閣集 composed by Sun, he mentioned that he only started to compose poetry after he married Xi. Right after he passed the exam, he wrote "Chunbang fanghou zuo 春榜放後作" (Composing after the announcement of the result) to express his happiness though he only ranked second. See Sun Yuanxiang, *Tianzhenge ji* (collected in *Xuxiu siku quanshu*), *juan* 17, 4b. Therefore, I believe the above poetry written by Xi was a reply to this poem.

48 Guo Runyu, "De jiebao xizuo 得捷報喜作" (Receiving a successful result, I compose with delight), in *Guochao guixiu shi liuxu ji*, *juan* 48, 3b.

49 Liang Desheng, "Wen fuzi jie nangong queji 聞夫子捷南宮卻寄" (Hearing about my husband's success in the exam), in Shan Shili (ed.), *Qing guixiu zhengshi zaixu ji chubian*, *juan* 2, 7a.

its effectiveness. Still, it would be too biased to ignore the fact that a number of literati succeeded in passing the exam due to the encouraging voices surrounding them.<sup>50</sup>

### Conclusion: Integrating a gender perspective into historical studies

Famous scholars in the field of women and gender history such as Gerda Lerner, Joan Scott, Patricia Ebrey, Dorothy Ko, Susan Mann, and many more, have emphasized the importance of “using gender as a category of historical analysis.”<sup>51</sup> As Scott mentions, “such a methodology implies not only a new history of women, but also a new history.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, if we are looking for a panoramic view of the historical scene, integrating a gender perspective into current studies becomes a possible alternative. Patricia’s words are even more insightful, that “Chinese history and culture, in other words, look different after we have taken the effort to think about where the women were.”<sup>53</sup>

Obviously, investigation into the history of the civil exam from a gender perspective opens up a broader horizon to understand a more comprehensive picture of the exam culture in Qing China. The first-hand writings I analyzed present the most direct voices of literary wives in that period. The sources have clearly prescribed a historical scene in that wives, who appeared silently in their inner quarters, devoted themselves to supporting their spouses in taking the civil exam, by providing mental support and handling household affairs for their husbands. However, women’s spiritual support was only one way to relieve the emotional tension of exam candidates, and its effectiveness is unable to be estimated or calculated. Without their actual participation in the exam, I do not attempt to magnify how significant the roles of wives were. But based on the grounds of respecting extant historical sources, especially the first-hand materials written by Qing women, it seems unjustified to deny that there was an invisible and subtle place for women in the history of the civil exam, since passing the

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50 Gao Feng has listed examples of how wives’ encouragement led to males’ success. See Gao Feng, *Keju yu nüxing: Wenxin yu aichou*, pp. 100-103. In the article “Tangdai funü yu keju shulun,” the authors also conclude that in the Tang Dynasty, male’s success in the exam was somehow due to the support and encouragement of their wives. See Chen Jineng and Liang Jing, “Tangdai funü yu keju shulun,” p. 30.

51 In the 1970s, Gerda Lerner defined the possible challenges faced when placing women in history, in one of her masterpieces *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 115-126. Later, Joan Scott wrote a specialized article to discuss the usage of gender as a useful category of historical analysis, see her “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 5 (Dec. 1986), pp. 1053-1075. Patricia Ebrey, Dorothy Ko, and Susan Mann are eminent scholars in the field of Chinese women’s history, emphasizing the indispensable position and the diversity of women’s lives in imperial China. See Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*; Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century*.

52 Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” p. 1054.

53 Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period*, p. 271.

civil exam was a core value that was accepted by the whole society in imperial China, and women were a group of people that forcefully backed up this system. So, if we are to write a new and macro-history of the civil exam, it is necessary to think about where the women were, as they were one of the pushing forces of our historical development. Therefore, it would be a bias to ignore the fact that a number of literati succeeded in passing the exam partly due to their wives' encouraging voices surrounding them.

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### **Biographical note**

Hoi-ling Lui is a masters student in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, Columbia University. She examines literary women, intellectual couples and gender relations in a historical perspective, and has recently extended her interest to material culture in late imperial China. Her publications appear in *Journal of Chinese Studies* and *Overt and Covert Treasures: Essays on the Sources for Chinese Women's History*.