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POETRY AND THE LITERACY OF IMPERIAL WOMEN IN THE MING DYNASTY

ELLEN SOULLIÈRE

Massey University

Abstract

In recent years, scholars have identified a dramatic increase in the number of collections of poetry published by Chinese gentry women and courtesans from the late 16th century onwards. They have also highlighted the high levels of literacy of imperial women poets of the Tang and Song dynasties. A handful of poems can confidently be attributed to imperial women and women officials of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Considered sequentially, these poems provide a stimulating counterpoint to historical and didactic texts and access to the thoughts, emotions and voices of women of the imperial family and imperial household in complex historical and cultural contexts from the 14th to the early 16th century.

Keywords: women's literacy, Ming dynasty, poetry, history

Scholars have long debated hypotheses about the numbers of women and men who were literate in late imperial China. (See Rawski, 1979; Mote, 1999; Elman, 2000; Meyer-Fong 2007). Their work has been based in part on evidence that in elite and sub-elite circles, literate women used their skills for a range of practical purposes, including keeping household records and accounts in family businesses and educating their children. Rapid increases in women's literacy from the late 16th century onwards, especially among the populations of the wealthy cities of the Jiangnan region, but also in metropolitan Beijing and in Guangdong have been noted. The evidence for this includes the increase in the numbers of books published and sold, the number of books specifically intended for an audience of women and biographical narratives of women who educated their sons and daughters.

When women pursued literary interests of their own, they were likely to choose the medium of poetry. Much of the recent scholarship on women's literacy focusses on poetry written by courtesans and gentry women from the late 16th century onwards. Their work was published in collections that numbered more than three thousand (See Chang, 1997, p. 147; Chang and Saussy, 1999; Elman, 2000, pp. 239–241; Brokaw and Chow, 2005; Meyer-Fong, 2007; Fong, 2008, 2012; Kinney, 2012). A handful of poems attributed to imperial women and women who worked in the service agencies of the imperial household in the early and middle years of the Ming dynasty have been included in anthologies in Chinese and in English (See Xie, 1916; Shen, 1989; Chang and Saussy, 1997; Idema and Grant, 2004). These anthologies are in turn based on earlier Chinese anthologies, including one dated around 1626 and another compiled by

Zhu Yizun in 1705 (See Chang, 1997). A few more poems by women were included in the official history of the Ming dynasty. The poems that are available today reflect the special characteristics of their authors' individual social and political positions in the palace and invite exploration in the context of the history of the women of the imperial family and imperial household of the Ming dynasty.

Most of what we know about Ming imperial women and women in the imperial household can be found in historical texts. Biographies of imperial women in the official history, arranged chronologically from the beginning of the dynasty until the end, are the most complete textual accounts we have of events in their lives (Zhang *et al.* (eds.) 1736, Mingshi, hereafter MS; Soullière, 2016a). Unofficial accounts written during the late Ming and Qing periods supplement the official record (See for example, Shen, 1619; Liu, ca. 1641; Mao, early Qing). Collections of biographies of exemplary women and didactic instructions for the education of women were compiled in the early, middle and late Ming periods. The material record contributes stimulating new understandings to the study of women's lives and literacy.

In the Ming Confucian discourse about imperial women, some of the best-known poems from the Classic of Poetry, compiled around the eighth century BCE, occupied an important place. These poems were cited again and again in the didactic texts used in women's education and it was widely accepted that some of the poems in the *Classic of Poetry* were written by women (Chang, 1997). Only a handful of poems are attributed to the women of the Ming palace, but the attributions of those we do have are likely to be reliable and their approximate dates known. Considered sequentially, a selection of these poems provides a stimulating counterpoint to historical and didactic texts and access to the thoughts, emotions and voices of women who lived in the imperial family and imperial household in complex and rapidly changing historical and cultural contexts between the late 14th century and the second decade of the 16th century.

The literacy of imperial women in dynasties before the Ming

From earliest historic times, there were positions at Chinese royal and imperial courts for literate women officials. The titles of these positions included *the red brush* (tóng guǎn 彤管) and *the woman historian* or *instructress* (nǚshǐ 女史). From the Han dynasty onwards, the prescription of the ranks and positions of women officials and the duties they were expected to perform were described in the official histories. Literacy enabled women to perform innumerable complex tasks in the palace. These included keeping records of the lives of the women who served the court, recording the dates when women "attended the emperor" and the subsequent births of children, providing women in the imperial household with instruction on virtuous conduct, authorising the use of goods and services within the palace, educating other women and children and facilitating written communication between the palace and the outside world.

There is evidence that some women who held senior positions in imperial families were highly literate. For example, Empress Wu of the Tang dynasty and Shang Guan Wan'er, a senior woman official who served her, were renowned for their skills in poetry and calligraphy (See Idema and Grant (eds.) 2004, pp. 61–72). Empress Yang of the Song dynasty was a noted poet and calligrapher and connoisseur of painting. During the

Song, highly literate women officials prepared drafts of the emperor's correspondence, including final drafts that were circulated in their own fine calligraphy, which closely resembled the emperor's (See Lee, 2010, chapters 2 and 4). A few poems in Chinese by consorts who served the Yuan Emperors Wuzong and Shundi are also available (Shen, 1989, pp. 431–442).

Women's literacy in the Ming imperial household

Like the Song and earlier dynasties, the Ming dynasty maintained a large bureaucracy staffed by women within the imperial household. Two hundred and eighty-three positions for literate women were prescribed in the treatise on official positions in the official history. These women are referred to generically as "women officials" (nǚ guān 女官) (See MS ch. 74, pp. 1827–1829; Soullière, 1987, pp. 246–257; Hsieh, 2000, pp. 70–71). Recruitment of women for these positions was carried out with the express requirement that they should be literate and able to do mathematical calculations. Further training was provided for them once they had entered the palace. Despite the highly specified prescriptions of the responsibilities of these women in the official history, other textual references to their activities are scarce and sometimes contradictory.

Provision was made for the education of imperial women at successive Ming courts. Records from the reigns of Ming Taizu and the Yongle Emperor show that, under the influence of the Confucian officials who served the court, a text called *Elementary Learning* (Xiǎo xué 小學), written by the Song Neo-Confucian philosopher, Zhu Xi, (1130–1200) was prescribed as a primer to be used in the primary education of both boys and girls. (MS, 113, p. 3506; *Nei Xun*, 1405, preface). Liu Ruoyu records that towards the end of the dynasty, the education of girls and young women in the imperial palace often began with the study of prose texts from a primer-level curriculum. This curriculum included the *Thousand Character Classic* (千字文 Qiān zì wén), the *Hundred Family Surnames* (百家姓 Bǎi jiā xìng) and the *Classic of Filial Piety* (孝經 Xiào jīng). Women then studied the *Admonitions for Women* by Ban Zhao of the Han dynasty, the *Instructions for Women* by the Jiajing Emperor's mother and classic texts including the *Book of Rites*, the *Classic of Poetry*, the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Analects*. Women who mastered these works received the title "women graduates" and were eligible for appointment as Bearers of the Seal in the Office of Palace Attendance or in one of the six services (Liu Ruoyu, ca. 1641, ch. 16 pp. 56 a and b; Soullière, 1987; Soullière, 2014, p. 40; Jang, 2008, pp. 144–145). Throughout the Ming, girls and women were encouraged to listen to the recitation of didactic texts and to learn to read them themselves. These texts were designed to shape their thinking about themselves and their place as women in the family.

Poetry is the genre in which texts associated with imperial women are most likely to have been written by the women themselves. Imbued with personal and emotional content and details of the life of the court, their poems provide unique insights into women's thoughts, observations and emotions. A close reading of some of these poems has much to contribute to understandings of their literacy and their lives in rapidly changing historical and cultural contexts from the reign of Ming Taizu until the end of the reign of the Zhengde Emperor in 1521.

Literate women at the court of Ming Taizu, the Hongwu Emperor, r. 1368–1398

The Ming dynasty sprang from a rebellion fueled by millenarian religious doctrines and deep popular discontent after decades of famine, pestilence, warfare and deteriorating relationships between Han Chinese scholar-officials and the Mongol rulers of the Yuan dynasty whom they served. As a youth, Zhu Yuanzhang, who became the first emperor of the Ming dynasty, lost most of his family to starvation and disease, began training as a monk and then threw in his lot with one of the rebel leaders. There is good evidence that during his astonishing ascent from penury to become the founder of a new Chinese dynasty, he acquired a level of literacy sufficient to read court documents, draft imperial rescripts and write documents of many kinds, including letters (See Mote, 1999, p. 578–579).

The family of the girl who became the first empress of the Ming dynasty was so poor that they had to give her away to be brought up in the household of Guo Zixing, a military leader whose base was in present-day Anhui Province. Married to Zhu Yuanzhang in 1352, she would become the Filial, Compassionate, Exalted Empress Ma, the first empress of the Ming dynasty. Her biography in the official history is peppered with references to the ways that her literacy contributed to the development of the nascent Ming state. It states that in the early years of turmoil before the founding of the dynasty, “whenever the (future) emperor had books or documents to be read and recorded, he ordered the (future) empress to look after them. If he suddenly needed to see one of these documents, she immediately located it and gave it to him. She never made a mistake” (MS 113, p. 3508; Soullière, 2016b, p. 29).

Because of political exigencies in the reigns of Ming Taizu and the Yongle Emperor, Empress Ma’s literacy came to be framed, not just in terms of practicalities, but also as an echo of multiple historical and literary precedents. Allusions to the classics in early Ming texts added to the authority and legitimacy of the emerging dynastic institutions. The empress’ biography reports that she “loved the *Classic of Poetry* and the *Classic of Documents*”. In popular belief, reading these classic texts was thought to lead to the improvement of family fortunes and career advancement. Her biography states that from the founding of the dynasty until her death, Empress Ma engaged with high culture concepts of literacy, leading the women of the court in the practice of reading didactic texts. She is said to have often recited Zhu Xi’s *Elementary Learning*, and to have exhorted the emperor to put its teachings into practice (MS 113, p. 3506; Soullière, 2016b, p. 30).

In the portrait of Empress Ma (Fig. 1), we see her as she was often remembered and portrayed, a kindly woman of simple tastes, whose virtuous words and deeds had helped to found an empire. Her biography states that she asked the women officials to instruct the women of the palace about the lives of the virtuous empresses of the past. To facilitate this project, in 1368, Ming Taizu ordered the officials of the Hanlin Academy to compile didactic works for women. The books they produced drew on Confucian traditions, including the *Classic of Poetry*, a text which dates from nearly a millennium before the Common Era. These books were a key facet of the Ming dynasty’s claims to be the legitimate successors of Tang and Song and their messages were reiterated and renewed over the course of the Ming. At the same time, literate women were recruited and trained to serve as officials in the complex, multi-level service organizations



Figure 1: *The Filial, Compassionate, Exalted Empress Ma*, National Palace Museum, Taipei, ink and colours on silk 1065 mm. x 748 mm. Masterpieces of Chinese Portrait Painting in the National Palace Museum, p. 39.

within the imperial household. Empress Ma is thought to have personally welcomed a highly literate widow into the palace. Lady Fan was a native of Qingjiang in present day Hubei Province and the daughter of an eminent Yuan dynasty literatus called Fan Peng. Empress Ma rewarded Lady Fan for her services with the title of Lady (*fūrén* 夫人) and later gave permission for her to return home to her native place (Shen, 1989, p. 443). In the early years of the Ming dynasty, literacy was a celebrated attribute and skill of the empress, the imperial consorts and the other women who staffed the “six palaces”, served the emperor and the imperium and were potential mothers of princes and princesses (MS 113, pp. 3505–3508).

One of the didactic works for women prepared by the Hanlin Academicians was called the *Household Instructions* (內訓 *NèiXùn*, 1405). This text is associated both with Empress Ma and with the Humane, Filial and Cultured Empress Xu, principal wife of the Yongle Emperor (See Soullière, 2016a). Its twenty chapters are filled with advice and admonitions for women with frequent reference to the authority of classic Confucian texts. Two poems from the *Classic of Poetry* are cited and glossed in the *Household Instructions*. We are on solid ground when we assume that both poems were

well known to the women of the Ming imperial palace. These poems had attracted Han dynasty interpretations that linked them to rationales for maximising the number of sons born to emperors through the provision of multiple consorts. These were the interpretations that were dominant nearly two millennia later during the Ming.

The two poems celebrate the idea of imperial women whose virtuous conduct contributed to the legitimacy of a dynastic ruler and the orderly governance of his household. The expectations of the virtues of imperial women were so high as to be frequently unattainable. However, at the same time, the discourse in which these expectations were embedded provided opportunities for able women to benefit from the association of their activities with the highest articulated goals of the imperial family, the dynasty and the state (See Soullière, 1992).

Little Stars 小星

小星	Xiǎo xīng	Little Stars
嘒彼小星	Huǐbǐ xiǎo xīng	Sparkling, the little stars
三五在東	Sānwǔ zài dōng	Three or five in the East.
肅肅宵征	Sùsù xiāo zhēng	Solemnly, we go at night.
夙夜在公	Sù yè zài gong	Morning and night we work.
是命不同	Shì mìng bù tóng	Truly, fates are unequal.
嘒彼小星	Huǐbǐ xiǎo xīng	Sparkling, the little stars
維參與昴	Wéi cān yú mǎo	And there are Orion and the Pleiades.
肅肅宵征	Sùsù xiāo zhēng	Solemnly, we go at night.
抱衾與裯	Bǎo qīn yú chōu	We carry coverlets and sheets.
是命不猶	Shì mìng bù yóu	Truly, fates are unequal.

(*Classic of Poetry* II: X, ca. 8th C. BCE; Legge, 1871, Book II, Ode X, p. 31; Nei Xun, 1405, ch. 13 p. 15a).

Little Stars is a *shi* 詩 poem with just ten lines, each of four characters. Three of the lines are repeated, reinforcing its message. The poem refers to the experiences of low-ranking servants of the household whose responsibilities included looking after the bedchamber. They are only Little Stars, while the status of those they serve is like that of the great constellations that dominate the night sky. In later commentaries, accepted in the Ming, the poem was interpreted as a hymn to the humility of lesser consorts who accepted humiliating conditions in their service to the ruler and never sought to challenge the position of the other women who outranked them in the palace hierarchy. It was celebrated as a paean to the suppression of jealousy among the women of the palace.

Locusts

Locusts, from the *Classic of Poetry*, is also quoted in the *Household Instructions*. This poem came to be associated with Taisi 太似, the youngest of the three founding mothers of the Zhou royal house. In accounts of Taisi, history and myth are closely interwoven. She was the wife of King Wen, and the mother of King Wu and the Duke of Zhou. Historical accounts of her life are included in Sima Qian's Records of the

Grand Historian and Liu Xiang's Biographies of Virtuous Women. There, we learn that she came from an aristocratic lineage that linked her to the Great King Yu, the mythical figure who quelled the floods and controlled the rivers. Both Sima Qian and Liu Xiang record the dramatic reception that King Wen gave her on their wedding day, when a massed flotilla of boats spanned the Wei River to welcome her. Both accounts also note that she treated his mother and grandmother with exemplary filial piety and that she educated her ten sons. Two of these sons, the future King Wu and the Duke of Zhou, came to be associated with a golden age of good governance at the beginning of the Zhou dynasty.

During the early Han period, a *Little Preface* was written to accompany the *Songs of Zhou and the South* and the *Songs of Shao and the South*, the section of the *Classic of Poetry* where this poem is found. In the Little Preface, an additional layer of meaning was added to the poem. It was interpreted as an expression of Taisi's virtuous tolerance, restraint and lack of jealousy. Her acceptance of King Wen's secondary consorts was said to have ensured that many sons were born to their royal house. Although the earliest accounts of Taisi attribute exceptional fecundity to her personally, the later interpretation stuck fast and became one of the central virtues for which Taisi was praised in subsequent centuries, including the Ming.

Locusts shares many qualities with other poems in the *Classic of Poetry*, including its hypnotic rhythms and close connection with the natural world. It challenges modern sensibilities with its graphic images of strings of insect spawn and the startlingly direct and brutal parallels that it suggests between the prolific spawning of insects and human reproduction. Brimming with onomatopoeia, the sounds of the poem imitate the thrumming of the wings of innumerable locusts as they swarm, mate and give birth to a new generation. The multiple repetitions, probable internal rhymes and regular three-three-seven beat give it a raw, rhythmic power, like an incantation or a magic spell.

The Hànyǔpīnyīn transliteration of the modern standard Chinese pronunciations of the characters below gives a sense of the poem's sounds. The readings would have been significantly different in the classical Chinese of the time of the poem's origin.

Locusts 螽斯

螽斯羽詵詵兮	Zhōng sī yǔ shēnshēn xī	Locusts' wings, throng, throng.
宜爾子孫振振兮	Yí ěr zǐ sūn zhènzhèn xī	It is right that sons and grandsons come in swarms.
螽斯羽薨薨兮	Zhōngsī yǔ hōnghōng xī	Locusts' wings, whirl, whirl.
宜爾子孫繩繩兮	Yí ěr zǐsūn shéngshéng xī	It is right that sons and grandsons come in strings.
螽斯羽揖揖兮	Zhōngsī yǔ jījī xī	Locusts' wings, cluster, cluster.
宜爾子孫蟄蟄兮	Yí ěr zǐsūn zhézhé xī	It is right that sons and grandsons come in swarms.

In the *Household Instructions* of 1405 and in other Ming didactic works intended for the education of women, the poems *Little Stars* and *Locusts* appear again and again. In every case, they are interpreted as hymns to women's virtuous suppression of jealousy. The same concept appears in the Ming official history, where Empress Ma is praised for having exemplified this paradigmatic virtue (MS 113, p. 3508; Soullière, 2016b, p. 33).

A song for Empress Ma

The official history records that when Empress Ma died in 1382, the women officials wrote a poem in her memory. This poem was included in her biography in the official history and was probably intended to be chanted or sung.

Song for Empress Ma

我后聖慈	Wǒ hòu shèng cí	Our empress, wise and compassionate
化行家邦	Huàxíng jiā bāng	Transformed family and state,
撫我育我	Fǔ wǒ yù wǒ	Comforted us, taught us.
懷德難忘	Huái dé nán wàng	The moral power she cherished will be hard to forget.
懷德難忘	Huái dé nán wàng	The moral power she cherished will be hard to forget,
於萬斯年	Yú wàn sī nián	Even in ten thousand years.
毖彼下泉	Bì bǐ xià quán	A spring pouring down.
悠悠蒼天	Yōu yōu cāng tiān	Oh, distant blue Heaven!

(MS 113, p. 3508; Soullière, 2016b, p. 34)

The song has a simple structure of eight lines, each four characters long. Its simple form and repetitions are reminiscent of poems in the *Classic of Poetry*. Most of the poem is written in colloquial language, but it contains several allusions to the Classics. The reference to cherishing moral power in lines four and five is probably an allusion to the *Analects* of Confucius (Lunyu, 4: 11), which states that, “The cultivated person cherishes moral power. The small person cherishes land”. The suggestion that, like a Confucian official, an empress can be a cultivated person who cherishes moral power is noteworthy. The penultimate line, “like a spring pouring down” is a quotation from Ode 14, Quánshuǐ 泉水 from Book 3, The *Odes of Pei* in the *Classic of Poetry*. This poem refers to a young woman's desire to return to her family home to see her parents again after her marriage. Later commentators used the references to marriage to connect the poem to the roles of imperial women. The final line of the song, “Oh, distant blue heaven” is taken from Book 6, Ode 1, Shǔlǐ 黍離. The original is a lament to heaven at the untimely loss of a leader (See Legge, v. 4, book 6: I, p. 110).

In the poem for Empress Ma, the lines borrowed from the two classic poems have positive associations with the natural world, with the bubbling waters of a life-giving spring and with the blue sky overhead. They are inserted into the poem without much

of a segue to connect them to the previous lines, giving the reader the impression of a certain lack of sophistication on the part of the poets. The poem is delivered in the generic voices of the women officials. It is a simple, effective vehicle for the expression of the grief of the women in the palace. Its message draws attention to the importance of the classic texts that underpin the legitimacy of the dynasty and the importance of the place of the empress in the assertion of the dynasty's claims to legitimate rule. It affirms the unity of the empress' moral power and the power of the imperial family and the state in the second decade of the dynasty's rule.

A poem from the Xuande reign: 1426–1436

Just over four decades after the death of Empress Ma, Ming Taizu's great-grandson ascended the throne as the Xuande Emperor. During the ten years of his reign, high culture activities of many kinds flourished. The Emperor himself was a painter of note and material objects of great refinement including paintings, ceramics and bronzes, were produced. The painting in underglaze blue on a fine ceramic vase (Fig. 2) dated to the Xuande reign depicts beautifully dressed and coiffed women engaged in elegant pastimes including reading books, studying paintings, playing weiqi chess and playing the stringed instrument called the guqin. Literacy was an integral part of each of these pastimes at a court that was already far removed from the rough and ready culture of the 14th century court of Ming Taizu.



Figure 2: Xuande or Zhengtong (1426–1449) porcelain wine jar with underglaze blue decoration, h. 344 mm, d. 221 mm. Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, Shanghai Museum, after Clunas and Harrison-Hall, 2014, Fig. 165.

Consort Guo's lament for her own life

A poignant narrative from the Xuande reign tells of a woman known as Consort Guo (1400–1428). She was a native of Fengyang, the ancestral seat of the Ming house in present-day Anhui Province. Her grandfather was Guo Ying, Marquis of Wuding, (1335–1403), one of Ming Taizu's closest military associates. Consort Guo is likely to have been selected for service in the palace because of her literary skills. It is possible that she began her career as a woman official and received the title of Consort posthumously. The ill-fated Consort Guo fell ill only twenty days after entering the palace. When she knew that death was imminent, she wrote a lyric poem (cí 辭) in the Chu style as a lament for herself (zì āi 自哀). Her poem expresses her profound sorrow as she faces an untimely death. She uses a conventional simile, comparing life to a dream, then startles and saddens the reader by stating that death will be an awakening. She pictures her death as a return to her family and writes of her shame at having failed in her filial obligations. The rewards they received for her service to the court would have ended with her death. And of course, she has also failed to bear a son to the emperor, an accomplishment that would have improved her own fortunes and those of her family. Her deeply personal lament carries a powerful emotional charge and conveys an overwhelming sense of failure and despair.

Consort Guo Ai's Lamentation for herself c. 1426–1436

修短有數兮	Xiūdǎn yǒu shù xī	Long or short, lifespans are fated.
不足較也	Bù zú jiào yě	It's no use to compare them.
生而如夢兮	Shēng ér rú mèng xī	Life is like a dream.
死則覺也	Sǐ zé jué yě	Death, an awakening.
先吾親而歸兮	Xiān wú qīn ér guī xī	I will go first and return to my family,
慚予之失孝也	Cán yú zhī shī xiào yě	Ashamed of my failure to be filial.
心悽悽而不能已兮	xīn qī qī ér bù néng yǐ xī	My heart aches and this cannot end.
是則可悼也	Shì zé kě dào yě	Truly, this is cause for lamentation.

(Lady Guo, MS, 113, p. 3515; Xie, 1916, p. 11)

***Lady Wang, Director in the Fabric Service* 司綵王氏**

A poem from the hand of a woman official who served in the household bureaucracy during the Xuande reign has also been preserved. Her surname was Wang and she came from Nanhai, a place name that in Ming texts usually refers to Guangdong. She held a position ranked 6a in the Office of Fabrics. Her poem begins with a reference to

the beautiful women who were drawn to the imperial palace. The jewelled flowers in the first line may be interpreted as referring both to the beautiful young women who entered the palace and to the jewelled ornaments encrusted with pearls and gemstones that they wore in their hair and on their crowns. The frozen fragrance of the single tree in the second line may be intended to contrast the purity and loneliness of one woman, perhaps the poet herself or perhaps another lady, with the more elaborately dressed and ornamented ladies who customarily enjoyed the emperor's company. The last two lines refer to the success of one woman, probably the woman whom the poet has represented with the image of the lone tree, in attracting the attention of the emperor. The final image, the sound of the jade flute that pierces the moonlight, lends itself to an erotic interpretation, a rare reference to sexual desire from a woman in the Ming imperial household. For those familiar with recent events in the Ming palace, the image of the jade flute also conjures up the spirit of the beautiful Lady Kwōn, a Korean consort who had charmed the ageing Yongle Emperor with her music and who had died tragically in 1410, aged just nineteen, the probable victim of murderous competition among the women of his household.

瓊花移入大明宮	Qiónghuā yí rù dà Míng gōng	Jewelled flowers enter the Great Ming Palace.
一樹凝香移晚風	Yī shù níng xiāng yí wǎn fēng	A single tree's frozen fragrance draws the evening breeze.
贏得君王留步輦	Yíng de jūnwáng liú bùniǎn	She succeeds in getting the ruler to pause his palanquin.
玉簫吹徹月明中	Yù xiāo chuī chè yuè míng zhōng	The sound of a jade flute pierces the moonlight.

(Lady Wang, Director of the Fabric Service, fl. 1426–1436; Xie, 1916, 3.2 p. 11; Wang Chongwu, 1948, p. 168)

The Zhengtong reign: 1436–1450 The Grand Empress Dowager Zhang farewells Huang Weide

The Accomplished, Filial, Luminous Empress Dowager Zhang, the mother of the Xuande Emperor, was for many decades the most senior woman in the imperial family. In her portrait (Fig. 3), we see her depicted in the court regalia that she would have worn on the most formal occasions. The magnificent clothing, jewelry, crown and elaborate make-up that were the prerogatives of an empress dowager near the end of the first hundred years of the Ming dynasty provide a dramatic contrast to the simplicity ascribed to Empress Ma at the time of the founding.

A poem from Empress Dowager Zhang's hand shows how, like other members of the ruling elite, she used her literacy for cultivating relationships within the social networks that supported the court. She wrote this poem to mark the retirement of Huang Weide, a senior official who had held the position of Keeper of the Seals, (Sībǎo 司寶), in the imperial household. After many years of service, Mme Huang was at last allowed



Figure 3: Anonymous court painter, *Chengxiao Zhao Empress Zhang* (d. 1442), album leaf, ink and colours on silk, 655 x 515 mm, National Palace Museum, Taipei, after Clunas and Harrison-Hall, 2014, p. 59.

to retire and return to her family in Nanhai, Guangdong. The poem is undated, but the authority with which the poet speaks and her sense of fellowship with the ageing subject of the poem make it likely that it should be dated towards the end of Empress Dowager Zhang's tenure as the most senior woman in the imperial household, perhaps between 1435 and her death in 1442. It movingly conveys the intimacy of the relationship between the Dowager Empress and her loyal and trusted official. Empress Dowager Zhang expresses gratitude for Mme. Huang's many years of service to the imperial family and celebrates her retirement at the age of seventy-four. This is a *shī* poem, composed of twenty-two lines, each of seven characters, with many of the lines arranged as pairs or couplets. The style of the poem is simple and straightforward, almost conversational. In the page from the facsimile edition of Zhu Yizun's 1705 collection of Ming Dynasty Poems reproduced below (Fig. 4), the poem is preceded by an abbreviated version of

the biography of Empress Dowager Zhang. Reading the two texts together affords an opportunity to consider the nature of the primary sources and the expressive richness of poetry as a counterpoint to the formality of an historical account. The biography reads,

The Empress' surname was Zhang and she came from Yongcheng County. She was the daughter of the Earl of Pengcheng, Zhang Qi. In the 28th year of the Hongwu reign, she was appointed consort to the heir to the Princedom of Yan. In the second year of the Yongle reign, she was appointed principal consort to the Heir Apparent. In the twenty-second year of the Yongle reign, when [Zhu Gaozhi, who became] Emperor Renzong, ascended the throne, she was invested as Empress. In the seventh year of the Zhengtong reign, she died. She was buried together with Emperor Renzong in his imperial tomb, Xianling. Her posthumous title was, 'Sincere, Filial, Respectful, Solemn, Illuminator of Virtue, Expansively Humane, Obedient to Heaven, Expositor of the Sages, Luminous Empress'.

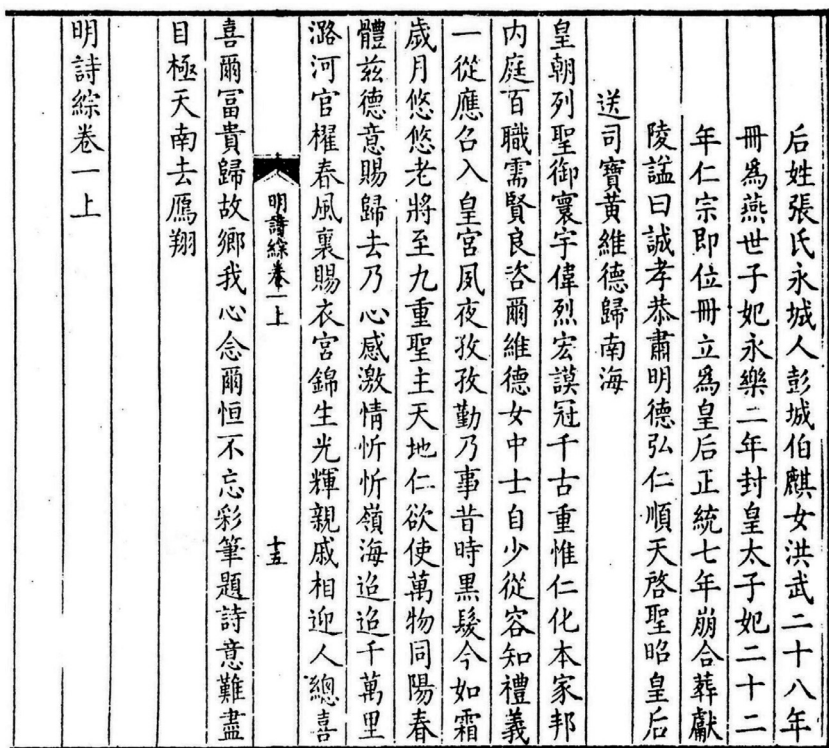


Figure 4: Cheng Xiaozhao Empress Zhang, Seeing off Keeper of the Seal, Huang Weide on her return to Nanhai, ca. 1435–1442, after Zhu Yizun (1705 ch.1, shang, p. 15a).

Seeing off Keeper of the Seals, Huang Weide, on her return to Nanhai

The sages of our imperial dynasty serve the world,
 Far-reaching models surpassing the ancients.
 With humaneness alone, they transform family and state.
 In the inner palace a hundred duties require virtue and goodness.
 Ah, Weide, a scholar among women,
 From youth you followed the knowledge of ritual and propriety.
 From the time you obeyed the edict and entered the imperial palace
 Morning and evening you applied yourself to your duties.
 Your black hair of former days is now like frost.
 The years and months have brought you to old age.
 The sages of the nine divisions of the celestial sphere control Heaven,
 Earth and Humaneness,
 Wishing to make all things one in the springtime of yang.
 In consideration of your virtue, we have granted your wish to return home.
 Hearts will be roused with feelings of delight
 On mountains and seas 10,000 li distant.
 On the Lu River, you will row in a light spring breeze.
 We have granted you robes of palace brocade to make you radiant.
 Your family will welcome you, everyone delighted,
 Delighted that you have come home, wealthy and honoured.
 In my heart, I will keep you and will not forget.
 As I take up my brush to make this poem, it is hard to express what is in
 my heart.
 As far as the eye can see, in the southern sky, wild geese soar.

**Poetry and the culture of the court and the imperial family in the Chenghua reign:
 1465–1488**

Sixty years after Empress Dowager Zhang wrote her poem for Huang Weide, the ability to read, write and recite poetry played an important role in the careers of two women who sprang from humble backgrounds. One became the mother and the other the grandmother of an emperor. The dynasty's *Ancestral Instructions* had ordered that the wives of the princes should be recruited from "good families" (liángjiā 良家) and not from the families of the elite. The commoner women who entered the imperial family in accordance with this criterion often came from families who belonged to the lower to middle ranks of the military (See Soullière, 1988, p.23). During the Chenghua reign, Lady Ji, the mother of the of Hongzhi Emperor, was captured during warfare in Southwest China, taken into the palace and raised by a eunuch who taught her to read, write and recite poetry. She attracted the emperor's favour through her literary accomplishments and bore a son who later reigned as the Hongzhi Emperor. In the same reign, another consort, Lady Shao, came from a family so poor that her father had to sell her. Her purchaser was the eunuch intendant in Hangzhou. As the protégé of this eunuch, she learned to read and write out hundreds of Tang dynasty poems. She came to the attention of the Chenghua Emperor because of her skill in reciting the poems.

She bore him three sons and decades later the eldest son of her eldest son ascended the throne as the Jiajing Emperor. Their eunuch guardians had equipped these two women with the good manners, pleasant speaking voices, mastery of the conventions of the court and familiarity with a corpus of poetry that were key to their success in the Chenghua reign (See MS 113, pp. 3521–3524; Mao, early Qing, ch. 3 pp. 9b–10a).

Poetry in the Hongzhi reign: 1487–1506 Shen Qionglian

By the dynasty's middle century, the literary sophistication of the women in the imperial household had again increased dramatically. Poetry retained its place alongside music, calligraphy and painting as one of the pleasant pastimes with which the members of the court occupied their leisure hours. The work of one highly literate woman official called Shen Qionglian (沈瓊蓮 fl. 1487–1506) stands out. A small number of her poems are available for study and they provide glimpses of the lives of the women who lived in the palace in the Hongzhi reign and the role that poetry played in families that aspired to upward mobility for their sons and daughters. She was born into a family of scholars from Wucheng County in present-day Zhejiang, who educated their daughters alongside their sons. She was recruited at the age of thirteen to enter the palace as a woman official (Xie, 1916, ch. 2, p. 12).

Shen Qionglian's skills first came to the attention of the Hongzhi emperor when she won a palace poetry competition. Her winning entry contained a clever pun, linking the word for “gecko” which the emperor chose as the theme, to its homophone, “defending the palace” shǒu gōng 守宮. She was promoted to the rank of woman scholar (nǚxuéshì 女學士) and held that rank until her death (Xie, 1916, p.11–12; Chang and Saussy, 1999, pp. 165–167). This title designates a senior rank among the women officials of the palace, and it is one that is not listed in the formally prescribed structures for the Six Services in the official history. This is evidence, scarce in other kinds of sources, of the titles that women officials held in the middle period of the dynasty. Unofficial historian, Shen Defu, provides another indication of the titles that were used when he notes that when women first entered one of the six services, they were given the title woman graduate (nǚ xiùcái 女秀才) (Shen, 1619, suppl. ch. 1 pp. 805–806).

Two of Shen Qionglian's poems achieved special renown. The first is addressed to her older brother and the second to her younger brother. In addition to highlighting the literary education and close relationships the three siblings shared in the family home where they grew up, both poems are rich in details of the roles of women officials in the operation of the imperial household. The first line of the poem dedicated to her older brother refers to stars and constellations, a possible allusion to the *Little Stars* poem in the *Classic of Poetry*. This poem is filled with images of beautiful objects including the distant towers of the palace buildings, the palace music, the mythical phoenix and the bluejay. The Bluejay Pavilion was a palace in a pleasure park built for the Han dynasty Emperor Wu. The setting of the poem indicates a scenario where the emperor is departing by carriage from the six palaces of the women's quarters at dawn, having spent the night there. Rows of beautifully arrayed women officials line his path. The women officials of the bedchamber, one of the six services staffed by women, light

fragrant sandalwood in braziers as the emperor returns to his own residence and the outer court. A senior consort, whom Shen designates with the title Lady of Luminous Deportment (Zhāoyí 昭儀), first used in the Han dynasty, leads the way as the emperor is carried along in procession.

奇兄		To my elder brother
疎明星斗夜闌珊	Shū míng xīng dòu yè lán shān	Bright stars and constellations grow distant as night fades like tinkling jade.
玉貌花容列女官	Yù mào huārōng liè nǚguān	Like jade, like flowers, the women officials stand arrayed.
風遞鳳凰天樂近	Fēng dì fèng huáng tiān yuè jìn	Wind carries the heavenly phoenix music closer.
雪殘鵲曉樓寒	Xué cán zhīquè xiǎo lóu hán	Snow dims the Bluejay Pavilion in the dawn cold.
昭儀引駕臨丹宸	Zhāoyí yǐn jià lín dān yī	The Lady of Luminous Deportment leads the imperial carriage towards the crimson screens.
尚寢熏爐熱紫檀	Shàngqǐn xūn lú rè zǐtán	Women Officials of the Bedchamber light sandalwood in braziers.
肅肅六宮懸象魏	Sùsù liùgōng xuán xiàngwèi.	In formal order, the six palaces stand in the distance.
春風前殿想鳴鑾	Chūnfēng qiándiàn xiǎng míng luàn	In the spring breeze the front halls await the sound of carriage bells.

(Sheng Qionglian, fl. 1487–1506; Xie, 1916, 6, p. 12; Wan Liu in Chang and Saussy (eds.) 1999, p. 165–166)

A second poem is addressed to Shen Qionglian's younger brother. It contains further details of the duties of women officials, duties that Shen herself may have performed within the palace. The wording of the poem suggests that these duties included greeting the Empress when she arrived at the Blue Chain-patterned gate within the palace for the start of the formal part of her day. In the evenings, Shen's job was to take documents to the Hall of Purple Tenuity, an elegant euphemism for the Central Drafting Office (Zhōngshū gé) in the Grand Secretariat, the Inner Court office that managed imperial correspondence (See Chang and Saussy, 1999, p. 167). In this poem, Shen Qionglian acknowledges her personal sorrow that time is passing her by. Silver candles gutter and burn out. Year after year, jade hairpins, symbols of her femininity, break and still she has had no opportunity to return home to see her family. This poem ends on a hopeful note, with the wish that her younger brother may pass the imperial examinations and that together they may be useful to the emperor and the state. The reference in the last line to offering court robes to the mountain dragon may be an allusion to the Sericulture

Ceremony, where the empress and the women officials made silk to be used in the emperor's garments. Despite the hopes expressed in this poem, there is no record of whether Shen Qionglian was ever allowed to see her beloved brothers again.

送弟溥試春官	Sòng dì pǔ shì chūn guān	To my younger brother at the spring examinations
少小離家侍禁闈	Shǎo xiǎo lí jiā shì jìn wéi	Since I left home when young to serve in the inner palace
人間天上兩依稀	Rénjiān tiān shàng liáng yī xī	The human world and the heavens have seemed insubstantial.
朝迎鳳輦趨青瑣	Zhāo yíng fèng niǎn qū qīngsuǒ	In the mornings I greet the phoenix palanquin at the Blue Chain- patterned gate.
夕捧鸞書入紫微	Xì pěng luán shū rù zǐ wéi	In the evenings I carry imperial docu- ments to the Hall of Purple Tenuity
銀燭燒殘空有夢	Yín zhú shāo cān kōng yǒu mèng	Silver candles burn out and there are dreams in the emptiness.
玉釵敲斷未成歸	Yù chāi qiāo duàn wéi chéng guī	Jade hairpins break and still I have not succeeded in returning home.
年年望汝登金籍	Niánnián wàng rǔ dēng jīn jí	Each year I hope that you will enter the golden lists.
同補山龍上袞衣	Tóng bǔ shānlóng shàng gǔn yī	Together, we could support the moun- tain dragon, offering court robes.

(Sheng Qionglian, fl. 1487–1506; Xie, 1916, 6, p. 12; Wan Liu in Chang and Saussy (eds.) 1999, p. 166–167)

In the middle years of the Ming, the ability to write sophisticated poems such as the two cited above won kudos for this woman official within the palace and fame in the wider world. This fame was not without its risks, however. Kang-I Sun Chang has noted that gentry women anthologists often ranked women poets according to their virtue and that, for fear of social scandal, many women poets burned or attempted to burn their own work (See Chang, 1997, p. 169). For the women of the Ming palace, the celebration of virtue was even more important than for gentry women. Secrets were closely guarded and fame carried with it a great risk of scandal. One reason for the scarcity of poems by Ming imperial women may be that, like their gentry counterparts, they destroyed their own work. An activity more likely to win general approbation was educating the imperial children. In another poem, Shen Qionglian mentions that the women officials taught the classics to the young princes before they began their formal studies (Shen, ca. 1488–1505, in Xie, 1916, p. 12). Her literary oeuvre provides us with a rare insider's view of the life of a woman official of the Ming court in the middle century of the dynasty.

The Zhengde reign: 1506–1522 Consort Wang's poem

The only surviving son of the Hongzhi Emperor ascended the throne as the Zhengde Emperor after his father's death in 1505. His refusal to conform to his officials' view of his role and his insistence on travelling about the realm for pleasure, military exploits and adventure are legendary. Despite his evident preference for the company of women who held no official positions at the court, one imperial woman who had a conventional title travelled with him on the tour of the south that he undertook in 1520. She was known as Consort Wang (王妃) and she has left a literary record of one of the experiences they shared. Like the emperor, she was a native of the north, born and raised in Beijing. While the emperor was based at Nanjing, she accompanied him on a visit to hot springs near Suzhou. During this visit, she wrote a poem in seven-character regulated verse (七言絕句). The emperor was said to have been so pleased with her poem that he had it carved onto a rock at the hot springs. In her poem, Lady Wang contrasts the cold and austere landscapes of their native north with the clear hot springs of their southern sojourn. She expresses a longing for the sorrows of the human world to be washed away by the billowing waters of the springs. In her vision, the surging pulse that flows through life's events fails to liberate the mind or to wash away the uncleanness of the world. The poem conveys an overwhelming impression of desolation, loss, and the futility of efforts to wash the world clean.

塞外風霜凍異常	Sàiwài fēng shuāng dòng yì cháng	Beyond the borders, the exceptional chill of wind and frost.
水池何事曠如湯	Shuǐ chí hé shì kuàng rú tāng?	How could watery pools be as clear as hot springs?
溶溶一脈流今古	Róngróng yī mài liú jīn gǔ	Surging and billowing, a pulse flows through present and past,
不為人間洗冷腸	Bù wéi rénjiàn xǐ léng cháng	Not cleansing the cold bowels of the human world.

(Lady Wang, fl. ca. 1520, in Xie, 1916, ch. 2, p. 12)

Lady Wang and indeed the emperor himself might have preferred to remain near the hot springs in the warmer climes of the South, but he decided to return to Beijing to celebrate the victory of the imperial armies over his kinsman, the rebellious Prince of Ning. He broke his journey to go fishing and while fishing alone, his small boat capsized. Although his attendants were able to save his life, he was stricken with an illness. He and his party continued on their journey back to Beijing, but his condition deteriorated and he died a few months later. There is no record of the fate of Lady Wang.

Reflections

Evidence to support arguments for the numbers of women who were literate in the Ming palace and in Ming society may continue to be elusive. However, the evidence from the early and middle periods of the dynasty shows that, like women in the wider society, Ming imperial women used their literacy for multiple purposes. At the beginning of the dynasty, Empress Ma's practical ability to keep written records played an important part in the transformation of a small rebel household into a dynasty that ruled an empire. The celebration of her paradigmatic words and deeds was an important facet of the claims of legitimacy made by Ming Taizu and the Yongle Emperor. The poems provide information on the operation of the complex bureaucracy staffed by highly literate women officials with prescribed ranks and duties that served the Ming court. These women officials worked closely with senior imperial women and with the emperor and their responsibilities included keeping family and household records, the seals and tallies that authorised the use of goods and services, the education of women and children and communication between the palace and the outside world. The biographical material that accompanies the poems identifies the native places of the poets, contributing to our understanding of the regions where women's literacy was fostered. Our poets came from Qingjiang in present-day Hubei; Fengyang in Anhui; Yongcheng in the Huai River basin near the border with Anhui; Nanjing, the southern capital in the heart of the Jiangnan region; Wucheng County in Zhejiang; Guangdong and Beijing.

When women read, wrote and recited poetry, their success contributed to progress in their careers. In some cases, it helped them to win the favour of the emperor and membership in the imperial family. Through poetry, women fostered and developed social networks that included members of their own natal families and other women inside and outside the imperial palace. They used their skills within a coterie of educated women and they educated other women, the young princes and probably also the princesses. Poetry became a vehicle for the expression of emotions that are usually absent from the other kinds of records of their lives that are available to us today. In their own authentic voices, women write of their grief, despair, desire, benevolent fellow-feeling, loneliness, hope and ambition.

The two poems and their commentaries from the *Classic of Poetry*, repeatedly cited in the dynasty's early years, celebrated ancient paradigms of the submission of women to the needs of the dynasty and the state. These themes were echoed in the simple *shi* poem written by the women officials to celebrate the virtue of Empress Ma and to imbue her memory with moral and political power. In this early poem, the expression of emotion was subsumed beneath an overarching theme of service to the imperial family and the state.

Poems from the Xuande reign sound a new note, showing the development of increasing sophistication in style, formal complexity, and ideation. Two women who held modest ranks in the imperial household voiced emotions including despair at the brevity of life, memories of the sad fate of one young consort and dreams that life in the palace might lead to transcendent happiness. Empress Dowager Zhang's poem, of

similar date, expresses her joy as she rewards a woman official who has served her well over many years. It is no accident that this most upbeat of the poems comes from the hand of a woman whose position at the top of the hierarchy of the imperial family and the imperial household was dramatically more secure than those of most of the other women who lived in the imperial palace during the Ming. Of the poets we have considered, only she had been the principal wife of an emperor and the mother and grandmother of his successors.

Shen Qionglian's poems from the Hongzhi reign are significantly more complex in form than those composed in the early Ming. They display an easy familiarity with the specialised language and conventions of a sophisticated imperial court. Her lexical choices denote the titles, ranks and duties of imperial consorts and women officials, and the mythical birds, the palace buildings and the rituals that symbolised the imperium. Her allusions to the names of Han dynasty palace buildings and consorts' titles display her familiarity with the history of imperial courts. Set amongst this profusion of images, Shen provides a carefully nuanced view of her own position in relation to her natal family, the dynasty and the state. Though she acknowledges her duty to the imperium, her reflections on her own position and experiences shine through as the dominant themes of her poems. Finally, Consort Wang's poem from the end of the Zhengde era powerfully evokes human observations of the natural world, but the emotion she expresses is despair, unmitigated by hope that the institutions of the imperial family and the state might bring order to the world. The Zhengde Emperor's decision to immortalise her poem by having it inscribed on stone implies that he may have shared her views.

Consideration of the poetry of Ming imperial women and women in the imperial household has much to add to the history of literate women in late imperial China. Literacy was the principal criterion for the recruitment of women officials and women had further educational opportunities within the palace. Literacy prepared women for hundreds of roles in the large, bureaucratic institutions of the imperial household. It enabled some of them to attract the attention of the emperor, bear children and join the imperial family. Women's poems provide perspectives on their lives that augment those found in other kinds of textual and material sources. During the 14th and 15th centuries and the first decades of the 16th, as empresses, dowager empresses, consorts and officials, the women poets of the Ming palace forged vital links in the chain of writing women who over centuries laid the foundations for the high levels of literacy of Chinese women in the present day.

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Biographical Note

Ellen Soullière completed her B.A. with Honours in Chinese History at Wellesley College and her M.A. and Ph.D. in East Asian Studies at Princeton University in the United States. In New Zealand she completed a Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language at Victoria University.

At Massey University she served as Senior Lecturer in the School of Language Studies, Head of School of Language Studies and Wellington Regional Director of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. Prior to that she was Senior Lecturer and Head of Department of Languages and Communication at Wellington Polytechnic. She is presently an Honorary Research Associate of the School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication at Massey.

Dr Soullière's research interests include Chinese history, the history of Chinese women, the history of Chinese art, material culture and literature, oral history, second language acquisition in English and Chinese, linguistics, applied linguistics, and translation.