

# Research on the Reading, Writing, and Publishing Overview of Qing Dynasty Boudoir Writers

Xiaoxuan Xing

College of Technical Education, Shenzhen Polytechnic University, Shenzhen, China

Email: xxing7@szpu.edu.cn (X.X.X.)

Manuscript received June 11, 2024; revised August 7, 2024; accepted September 3, 2024; published October 31, 2024.

**Abstract**—During the Qing Dynasty, the development of woodblock printing made reading and publishing more convenient. Coupled with the development of noble families and relatively open-minded contemporary thoughts, women, who had previously been excluded from the literary field, began to acquire knowledge, create works, and publish collections. In the era when prefaces and postscripts were highly valued, boudoir writers also began to widely solicit prefaces and postscripts, forming a unique ecosystem of boudoir literature.

**Keywords**—historical background, female reading, female publishing, preface culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, ancient China's woodblock printing industry reached its peak. The convenience brought by the developed publishing industry not only benefited male literati but also greatly helped women, who were often confined to the inner chambers and had limited access to formal education. Therefore, in addition to women's educational books, talented women in the Qing Dynasty had many opportunities to access other types of books. The prosperity of the book industry during the Qing Dynasty provided these talented women with an excellent opportunity to enter the hall of knowledge. With the support of their families and the relatively relaxed social environment, many women were no longer satisfied with merely being recipients of knowledge and culture but gradually became producers of literary works. As their writing matured and their works accumulated, these boudoir writers began to develop an awareness of preserving and editing their works, eventually stepping into the field of publishing. It was not uncommon for a female writer to publish multiple works or to have the same work reprinted several times. This paper aims to conduct a comprehensive study on the reading, writing, and publishing conditions of boudoir writers in the Qing Dynasty to gain a more comprehensive and three-dimensional understanding of the unique ecosystem of Qing Dynasty boudoir literature and culture.

## II. SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE FOR QING DYNASTY BOUDOIR WRITERS

Ancient China's woodblock printing industry reached its peak during the Ming and Qing dynasties. According to statistics, the total number of books printed in the Ming Dynasty was about 35,000, while in the Qing Dynasty, the total number of printed books was at least 74,900 [1]. The developed publishing industry made books easily accessible resources, and the activities of accessing, reading,

and collecting books became more common and everyday occurrences. According to Fan Fengshu's statistics, during the Qing Dynasty, there were 2082 private book collectors documented in literature [2], a number that surpassed the total of all previous dynasties. The number of private libraries also reached nearly 400 [3], setting a new high for the number of libraries in ancient China. The convenience of knowledge acquisition brought about by the developed publishing industry benefited not only male literati but also women confined to the inner chambers with limited access to formal education. Thus, we can see that talented women in the Qing Dynasty, in addition to reading ethical books like "Neize" and "Nüjie," also had many opportunities to access other types of books. For instance, the boudoir lady Wang Zhongxian read everything in the classics, history, philosophy, and literature [4], the talented lady Gu Ruopu especially liked to read history, from Ban Gu and Sima Qian to contemporary anecdotes, and could explain or write about their main ideas [5], and Zhang Hui besides Confucian classics, read everything in Zhuangzi, Chuci, various histories, and miscellaneous collections [6]. For those with a large collection of books at home, reading was even more convenient. Yun Zhu, born into a scholarly and bureaucratic family, was granted four hundred volumes of books, which formed the basis of her family's tradition [7], so Yun Zhu read extensively from a young age and later achieved great success in literature. Similarly, Wang Zhenyi's grandfather, Wang Zhefu, had seventy-five cabinets of books, and after her grandfather's death, the collection was maintained by Wang Zhenyi [8]. She read everything, and although the specific titles she accessed are difficult to know, her later writings (including literature, history, and even astronomy) reflect her broad range of reading and diverse knowledge acquisition.

In addition to women from families with rich book collections, some women gained access to a vast number of books through marriage into scholarly families. Luo Zhenchang mentioned that in modern times, book-collecting families often have husbands and wives working together on writing and publishing, leaving behind books and stories that become cherished tales [9], reflecting this phenomenon. The talented lady Shen Cai, a concubine of the book collector Lu Xuan, often wrote colophons for the books collected by her husband. The "Qingbai Leichao" records the anecdote of *Shen Hongping managing books for Lu Meigu*:

*Pinghu Lu Xuan, courtesy name Zizhang, also known as Meigu and Chaoyunzi, had a rich collection of books. There is a colophon by him on the Zhongtong edition of Shiji, "and it also bears the seal Managed by Shen Hongping. Hongping was the maidservant of Meigu [10]."*

Through reading and appreciating her husband's book collection, Shen Cai later became famous for her poetry, and her books reached far and wide. This shows that the prosperous book industry in the Qing Dynasty provided talented women with an excellent opportunity to enter the hall of knowledge.

### III. PUBLICATION OF POETRY AND LITERARY COLLECTIONS BY QING DYNASTY BOUDOIR WRITERS

The increased opportunities for reading facilitated the accumulation of knowledge among boudoir ladies. Combined with family support and a relatively relaxed social environment, many of these women transitioned from merely receiving cultural knowledge to becoming producers of literary works. During the Qing Dynasty, a significant number of literary-talented women emerged, as described by Zhang Maoji:

*During the Qing Dynasty, women's cultural achievements far surpassed those of previous eras... Literary-talented boudoir ladies were particularly abundant, with nearly every household having its own Cai Wenji or Xie Daoyun [11].*

As their writing matured and their works accumulated, these boudoir writers began to develop a consciousness for preserving and editing their works. For example, the boudoir writer Yuan Jingrong was deeply engaged in poetry, with her works filling entire boxes. She personally edited them, resulting in hundreds of poems [12], and the talented Xu Zihua copied her works by hand during her leisure time [13]. This awareness and act of preserving and editing poetry manuscripts often served as a prelude to entering the commercial publishing field. Yuan Jingrong, after editing her poetry manuscripts, instructed her son-in-law to help publish them. Under her supervision, her "Yue Qu Xuan Shi Cao" was published in the 28th year of the Daoguang era (1848), demonstrating her importance placed on publishing her works. Publishing their works even became a lifelong wish for some boudoir writers. Boudoir lady Dong Baohong once wrote a poem *Moved by the Difficulty of Publishing* due to the challenges she faced in publishing her works. Phrases such as *pitiful drops of blood* and those *who pass down to posterity are truly blessed* reveal Dong's deep appreciation for her own works and her strong desire to have them published [14].

Compared to boudoir writers of previous generations, Qing Dynasty boudoir writers were undoubtedly more fortunate. They not only had broader access to knowledge and more freedom to preserve and handle their manuscripts but also had multiple channels through which their manuscripts could be published. Besides the aforementioned self-publishing method by Yuan Jingrong, many boudoir writers' works were published through various opportunities and reached the public. For instance, Zhang Hui's *Leng Xiang Ge Yi Gao* was lost during wartime and could not be published during her lifetime, but her descendants compiled and published the remaining manuscripts while compiling the family genealogy. Her descendant Qin Fu commented, as we compile the family genealogy, it is the right time to publish the remaining manuscripts [15], reflecting a common publication channel

for boudoir works. Some boudoir writers' works were also published alongside their husbands' collections. For example, Wang Qisun included his wife Cao Zhenxiu's poems and essays in his own poetry collection, titling it *Xie Yun Xuan Xiao Gao* and writing a preface for it. Publishing alongside their husbands became an important way for Qing Dynasty boudoir writers to publish their poetry collections. Additionally, some supporters of female literature voluntarily collected and published boudoir writers' works. Wu Qian, a literati who supported boudoir writers, republished Xu Can's *Zhuo Zheng Yuan Shi Yu* after the original woodblocks were destroyed, and included Xu Can's other work *Zhuo Zheng Yuan Shi Ji* in *Hai Chang Li Ze Ji*. Another literati, Xu Zirong, raised funds to publish Liu Yin's poetry collection, which was finally printed and published in the 26th year of the Daoguang era (1846).

Furthermore, it was not uncommon during the Qing Dynasty for a female writer to publish multiple works or have the same work reprinted several times. For example, the prolific female writer Gui Maoyi published *Xiu Yu Xiao Cao*, *Xiu Yu Xu Cao*, *Xiu Yu Zai Xu Cao*, *Xiu Yu San Xu Cao*, *Xiu Yu Si Xu Cao*, and *Xiu Yu Wu Xu Cao*. Similarly, the talented writer Wu Zao published multiple works throughout her life, including the poetry collection *Hua Lian Shu Wu Shi*, the lyric collections *Hua Lian Ci* and *Xiang Nan Xue Bei Ci*, the poetry and lyric collection *Xiang Nan Xue Bei Lu Ji*, and the play *Qiao Ying*. *Qiao Ying* was published at least twice, in the fifth (1825) and sixth (1826) years of the Daoguang era. *Hua Lian Ci* and *Xiang Nan Xue Bei Ci* were also combined and published as *Xiang Xue Lu Ci*.

From the above, it is evident that there were multiple channels and conveniences for the publication of poetry and literary collections by Qing Dynasty boudoir writers. Wu Zao described the publication of boudoir collections in Hangzhou: *Hangzhou is a hub of talent, with generations of talented boudoir ladies, and those who are skilled in poetry and lyrics all have their works printed* [16]. Although this statement might be slightly exaggerated, it reflects the flourishing publication scene of boudoir writers in Hangzhou and the entire Jiangnan region. This flourishing publication scene contributed to the unprecedented prosperity of boudoir literature in Chinese history, with the total number of published female collections far surpassing previous generations, exceeding 3,000 volumes [17].

### IV. THE TREND OF PREFACES AND POSTSCRIPTS IN QING DYNASTY BOUDOIR WRITERS' POETRY AND LITERARY COLLECTIONS

Prefaces and postscripts, as practical literary forms attached to books, serve functions such as providing information about the author, explaining the reasons for creation and publication, and elucidating the main content of the book. The practice of literati writing prefaces and postscripts for each other's works is a distinctive feature of Chinese literary tradition [18]. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the increasing number of published books naturally led to a significant rise in the number of prefaces and postscripts. In the *Ming Wenhai (A Collection of Ming Literature)*, out of 480 volumes, 116 volumes are dedicated to prefaces, including 44 volumes specifically for poetry and literary collections, which is quite substantial. In the Qing

Dynasty, the number and importance of prefaces and postscripts remained noteworthy. In the Qing *Wenhai* (*A Collection of Qing Literature*), there are over 5,000 preface and postscript articles, accounting for more than 30% of the total articles. Prefaces and postscripts had clearly become an important type of writing for Ming and Qing literati. For instance, the literary leader Qian Qianyi wrote more than 200 prefaces throughout his life [19], making them a significant part of his works. Influenced by the trend of writing prefaces, boudoir writers who began to enter the commercial publishing field also recognized the role and status of prefaces and postscripts, as seen in numerous records showing their emphasis on these forms. For example, the female writer Wang Yunmei, on her deathbed, entrusted her mother to solicit a preface for her poetry collection:

*Wang Yunmei regretted her early works and discarded five or six out of ten, compiling her life's poetry into one volume. Just as she finished, she fell ill. Before her death, she instructed her mother: "You must ask Grand Historian Sun to write a preface so that my work can be believed and transmitted to future generations." Her mother agreed, and only then did Wang Yunmei close her eyes [20].*

Even at the point of death, Wang Yunmei did not forget to ask her mother to request a preface from Sun Yuanxiang, showing her high regard for prefaces. Similarly, the talented late Qing writer Xue Shaohui, on her deathbed, was still concerned about the prefaces and postscripts of her poetry collection. She personally requested a preface from Chen Shoupeng, who recorded the event:

*Lady Xue was critically ill and personally edited Daiyunlou Poetry Collection. She said to me: "Women's words are not valued in the world. I have followed you for a long time, and everything I have experienced and entrusted to my soul is in this collection, all born from hardship. No one understands me better than you. Please write a preface for me someday." I casually agreed to comfort her, not expecting her to pass away soon after [21].*

These instances show that boudoir writers placed great importance on prefaces and postscripts, considering them an indispensable part of their poetry and literary collections.

In the context of the widespread publication of boudoir poetry and literary collections and the flourishing trend of writing prefaces, it became increasingly common for literati, family members, and friends to write prefaces and postscripts for these collections. A survey of Qing Dynasty boudoir writers' poetry and literary collections reveals that almost all are adorned with prefaces and postscripts. It was not uncommon to see collections with multiple prefaces and postscripts, such as Wang Duan's *Ziran Haoxuezhai Poetry Draft*, which has seven prefaces and postscripts, He Yuying's *Shuyingxuan Yicao* with eight, Ling Zhiyuan's *Cuiluoge Poetry Collection* with nine, and Fang Fangpei's *Zaiputang Poetry Draft*, *Zaiputang Continued Draft*, and *Zaiputang Sequel*, which together have 14 prefaces and postscripts, including those by famous figures like Shen Deqian and Wang Mingsheng. When a collection was republished or recompiled, the number of prefaces and

postscripts often increased. For example, Gui Maoyi's *Zai Xu Cao*, *San Xu Cao*, *Si Xu Cao*, and the manuscript *Xiuyu Xu Cao* were combined into *Xiuyu Xu Cao* and republished in the 12th year of the Daoguang era (1832), adding prefaces by Tao Zhu, Chen Luan, Wu Qitai, and Wei Wenying. For boudoir writers, prefaces and postscripts seemed to have become an integral part of a complete collection, indicating that many boudoir poetry and literary collections had become part of the commercial book industry.

As a highly social literary form, prefaces and postscripts often faced criticism for being excessively flattering, overshadowing the main text, seeking undeserved fame, and being of little benefit to the collection. Song Dynasty literati Yao Mian had already suggested that if the work itself is delightful, what need is there for a preface at the beginning and poetry is not transmitted through prefaces [22]. Although such criticisms did not fundamentally shake the importance of prefaces and postscripts, they persisted. Therefore, when the trend of inviting prefaces emerged among the somewhat controversial group of boudoir writers, it inevitably faced some skepticism. For instance, Qin Shan straightforwardly criticized that women poets often seek fame by flattering the powerful, their voices surpassing those of men [23], expressing his dissatisfaction with this trend. Despite criticisms of being overly social and profit-driven, it must be acknowledged that as literary works, prefaces and postscripts in boudoir poetry and literary collections have their own value attached to the main text and as independent entities. As a cultural phenomenon, they reflect the internal ecology of boudoir literature and its external social context, thus possessing unique significance and value.

Based on the special position of boudoir writers and female literature as well as the social, commercial and dialogical characteristics of the prefaces and postscripts genre, the prefaces and postscripts of Qing boudoir writers' anthologies have formed their own access mechanism, author system and writing paradigms. In terms of the access mechanism, due to the traditional gender perception, the prefaces and postscripts of Qing boudoir writers' anthologies were mostly given by the boudoir writers' relatives or requested by their male relatives on behalf, but there were also cases where the boudoir writers themselves requested the prefaces and postscripts or literati who appreciated the boudoir writers presented the prefaces. This also determines that the circle of authors of the prefaces and postscripts of Qing boudoir writers' anthologies is based on the male relatives of boudoir writers and extends outward, among which the husbands and brothers of boudoir writers play important roles. In terms of writing paradigms, the prefaces and postscripts of Qing boudoir writers' anthologies inherited the traditions of prefaces and postscripts writing while developing new traits of their own, such as a stronger biographical tendency and moral reference than those written by male literati, a fixed section for rationalizing the writing in the face of doubts about women's writing and publishing, and a common feature of divinizing female authors. Besides, under these common writing paradigms, the prefaces and postscripts from authors with different identities often present different perspectives and expectations.

The prefaces and postscripts of Qing boudoir writers' anthologies bring together a variety of social identities,

including both genders, mainstream literati and marginal writers; they are also flooded with various voices, from those who understand and support boudoir literature and culture; to those who are neutral and observant; and to those who are opposed to it and biased against it; they also bring together a variety of perspectives. From them, we can see how the mainstream male literati viewed female literature and culture, how boudoir writers viewed themselves, and how writers of both genders reflected on the mainstream literary. The prefaces and postscripts of Qing boudoir writers' anthologies shows us a real and complex historical context, one in which multiple roles, voices, perspectives, and forces competed, and this offers a more clear view than the Qing boudoir literature itself.

#### V. CONCLUSION

During the Qing Dynasty, boudoir writers—female authors from elite households—were uniquely positioned to access, produce, and disseminate literary works in ways that previous generations of women seldom could. Benefiting from an expanding literary culture and opportunities for education, these writers engaged in creative expression that marked a significant cultural development in Chinese history. The literature they produced, known as boudoir literature, not only flourished with unprecedented speed but also established a distinct presence within the broader landscape of Chinese literary and cultural history. This body of work, often composed in poetry and personal essays, provides a rare insight into the inner lives, perspectives, and intellectual pursuits of women in an era marked by strict social conventions. Given its rich cultural implications and the nuanced reflection of gendered experience, Qing Dynasty boudoir literature offers extensive potential for scholarly exploration. Areas for further study include examining the influence of Confucian ideology on these writers, their modes of publication, and the cultural networks that facilitated their literary presence, underscoring the need for continued research into this unique literary phenomenon.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Y. H. Miao, *Draft of the Publishing History of the Ming Dynasty*, Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2000, p. 43.
- [2] F. S. Fan, *The History of Private Book Collections in China*, Elephant Publishing House, 2001, p. 269.
- [3] L. J. Yang, "Spatial and temporal distribution characteristics and reasons of private book collections in China," *Library Tribune*, December issue, 2021.
- [4] X. M. Hu and G. Z. Peng, *Collection of Women's Works in Jiangnan*, 1st ed. Huangshan Bookstore, 2008, p. 1023, 958, 1046, 866.
- [5] Y. N. Xiao, *Collection of Qing Dynasty Women's Works*, National Library Publishing House, vol. 1. 2014, p. 430.
- [6] X. M. Hu and G. Z. Peng, *Collection of Women's Works in Jiangnan: 1st ed.*, Huangshan Bookstore, 2008, p. 1077.
- [7] L. Li, *Anthology of Qing Dynasty Women's Poetry*, Zhonghua Book Company, vol. 5, 2015, p. 3099.
- [8] L. Li, *Anthology of Qing Dynasty Women's Poetry*, Zhonghua Book Company, vol. 5, 2015, p. 2952.
- [9] X. M. Hu and G. Z. Peng, *Collection of Women's Works in Jiangnan: Third Edition*. Huangshan Bookstore, 2012, p. 113.
- [10] K. Xu, *Qing Bai Lei Chao (Classified Notes of Qing Dynasty)*, The Commercial Press, 1917, ch. 31, p. 67.
- [11] L. Li, *Anthology of Qing Dynasty Women's Poetry*, Zhonghua Book Company, vol. 5, 2015, p. 2953.
- [12] X. M. Hu and G. Z. Peng, *Collection of Women's Works in Jiangnan: 2nd ed.*, Huangshan Bookstore, 2010, p. 903.
- [13] L. Li, *Anthology of Qing Dynasty Women's Poetry*, Zhonghua Book Company, vol. 10, 2015, p. 5539.
- [14] X. M. Hu and G. Z. Peng, *Collection of Women's Works in Jiangnan: 1st ed.*, Huangshan Bookstore, 2008, p. 958.
- [15] X. M. Hu and G. Z. Peng, *Collection of Women's Works in Jiangnan: 1st ed.*, Huangshan Bookstore, 2008, p. 1046.
- [16] X. M. Hu and G. Z. Peng, *Collection of Women's Works in Jiangnan: 1st ed.*, Huangshan Bookstore, 2008, p.866.
- [17] W. K. Hu (compiled) and H.S. Zhang (revised), *A Study of Women's Works in Chinese History (Revised Edition)*, Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2008, p. 1216.
- [18] R. Y. Wang, *Well-Ordered Printing: A Study of Book Prefaces in the Ming Dynasty*, The Commercial Press, 2020, p. 343.
- [19] H. X, "The 'Recognition of Topic' and 'Determination of Meaning' in the writing of collection prefaces: Taking Qian Qianyi's collection prefaces as an example," *Journal of Central South University (Social Sciences Edition)*, no. 3, 2018, p. 169.
- [20] X.M. Hu and G. Z. Peng, *Collection of Women's Works in Jiangnan: 2nd ed.*, Huangshan Bookstore, 2010, p. 1109.
- [21] L. Li, *Anthology of Qing Dynasty Women's Poetry*, Zhonghua Book Company, 2015, vol. 9, p. 5379.
- [22] M. Yao, *Xue Po She Ren Ji*, "Collection of rare song dynasty editions," Vol. 25. In: Sichuan University Institute of Ancient Books, Beijing: Threads-Bound Book Bureau, 2004.
- [23] X. M. Hu and G. Z. Peng, *Collection of Women's Works in Jiangnan: Fourth Edition*, Huangshan Bookstore, 2014, p. 723.

Copyright © 2024 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).