Ming-Qing Women Poets and Cultural Androgyny*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that while the Ming-Qing male literati became more and more absorbed in feminine culture, many women poets began to develop a life-style typical of the educated male. Like the male literati, these women poets constructed a poetic world of self-contentment and devoted themselves to painting, calligraphy, and other arts. In other words, these "liberated women" attempted to cultivate a "literary" style that was both creative and self-fulfilling. Traditionally, such activities belonged to the male domain, but now they were largely integrated into the female sphere, eventually creating a kind of "cultural androgyny" that was meant to erase gender opposition in the cultural realm.

KEY WORDS

literati
cultural androgyny
The Story of the Stone
Li Shao
marginalized literati
Ying and Yang
Qu Yuan
Yuan Mei

No nation has produced more women poets than Imperial China. During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties alone there were more than three thousand women poets who published their collections.[1] This number, of course, does not include the numerous talented women who burned their own poems.[2] This dramatic rise of women poets during Ming-Qing China (especially after the seventeenth century) is a rare and even unique phenomenon in world literature.

Elsewhere, I have explained this important phenomenon from several perspectives, including that of women's literacy, of the development of anthology-making, canon-formation, and genre theory.[3] Here, I shall view this subject in the light of the broad context of Ming-Qing literati culture. At the same time, I shall explore an interesting literary phenomenon of the Ming-Qing transition, one which I would call "cultural androgyny."

The unprecedented flourishing of women's writings during the Ming-Qing corresponded directly to the male literati culture of the time. There is no doubt, for example, that women's poetic anthologies had become best-sellers in various literati circles.[4] During this time, too, men actively preserved women's writings and tried to canonize women poets. Thus, unlike the careers of many English-speaking women poets, the Ming-Qing women writers' poetic vocation did not arouse resistance on the part of male scholars and critics. In fact, women poets were often encouraged by men to write and publish.

Why was there such male enthusiasm and support concerning women's publications in Ming-Qing China? Why is it that until very recently, scholars of Chinese literature and history (men or women)

have failed to notice this important phenomenon? These questions are especially urgent today because modern feminists have been arguing that women are victims of the patriarchal order.

In response, I must say something about the Chinese unqualified respect for "talent" (*cai*). Chinese women, however suppressed and mistreated socially, were taken seriously for the literature (especially poetry) they produced. From the Six Dynasties period onward, the concept of the "talented woman" (*cainü*) represents the literati poets' attempt to create a new and a special image of women. The ideal woman is one who not only is beautiful but is also talented in poetry-writing. During the Ming-Qing, fictional creation and historical drama especially testify that the prior concept of "talented man and beautiful woman" (*caizi jiaren*) had gradually been transformed into that of the "talented man and gifted woman," focusing not on the woman's beauty but on the equality of the male and female talents. In any case, this special concept of the "talented woman" began to occupy an important place within the Ming-Qing literati culture. Before I explore this topic further, I would like to say something about the nature of the literati culture.

First, the "literati culture" of the Ming-Qing was characterized by a general contempt for the examination system that had for centuries served as the literati's passage to power. As early as the sixteenth century the Chinese literati began to question the significance of the examination system with a special contempt for the so-called "eight-legged essay" required in such exams. It was in this context that a new culture, what may be called the culture of the "marginalized literati," (*bianyuan wenren*) slowly emerged.[5] Within the territory of political withdrawal—that is, withdrawal from the competitive world of examinations and officialdom—the literati constructed a poetic world of self-indulgence, characterized by their desire to escape from the conventional world, their emphasis on love and emotion, and their great admiration for the individual's literary talent. In other words, they began to favor things and activities that were non-pragmatic.

By far the most significant phenomenon of this new literati culture was a general tendency to favor literary women. In the first place,

the established male literati greatly admired the talent of women, and they were obsessed with women's writings. They edited, compiled, published and evaluated the works of famous women, both contemporary and ancient. Most important, their interest developed into a kind of nostalgia for an idealized notion of the feminine. Thus, what they eventually created was a kind of feminine culture, a romanticized version of women's studies. This new interest in observing and evaluating femininity on the part of the male literati even encompassed such particulars as women's dress and make-up, and the classification of flowers. What has been called *xiangyan* (ornate and flowery) in Chinese refers precisely to this kind of feminine culture as reflected in the writings of the marginalized literati. In other words, the Ming-Qing literati began to identify themselves with women. Because the literati were themselves marginalized, they especially sympathized with those talented women who suffered from great misfortunes, such as those women poets who were unhappily married, widowed, or died young. The male literati seemed to see the universality and allegorical significance of the tragic "talented woman doomed to misfortune" (cainü mingbo). For example, Yuan Mei (1716-98), the famous promoter of women poets, wrote, "I've been around for a long time and each time I encounter a woman with talent I find her to be unfortunate. Those who have beauty as well are still more unfortunate. . . . This indeed is the unalterable principle of the creator. What more can be said of it?"[6]

Quite naturally, then, the unfortunate female genius became a metaphor for the literati themselves. As the literati became increasingly marginalized, they also saw themselves as true artists and intellectuals doomed to misfortune, misfortune such as repeated failures in civil examinations and banishment from official employment. Unsurprisingly, they were inclined to view the tragic fate of gifted women as a reminder of their own helpless situation—like the women poets, they had talent but no opportunity to use it. Like the women poets, they also had a strong appreciation for aesthetic taste. Gradually, their enchantment with femininity and femaleness represented a tendency of the literati to engage in a kind of self-feminization.

It is interesting to observe that while male literati became more and more absorbed in the feminine culture, many Ming-Qing women poets began to develop a lifestyle typical of the educated male. Like the male literati, these women poets constructed a poetic world of self-contentment, attempting to rise above the concerns of daily domestic routines. They wrote poems, indulged in painting and calligraphy, and involved themselves in discussions concerning Zen and Daoism. Like the male literati, too, they insisted on the expressive value of poetry-writing, participating in frequent literary exchanges with men as well as other women. In other words, these "liberated" women attempted to cultivate a "literati" lifestyle that was both creative and self-fulfilling. Traditionally such activities belonged to the male domain, but now they were largely integrated into the female sphere, eventually creating a kind of "cultural androgyny" that was meant to erase male/female opposition in the cultural realm. This combined effort on the part of Ming-Qing literati and women poets arguably constitutes one of the most striking phenomenon of Ming-Qing culture. The general, overall impact of such a phenomenon, further may be termed "cultural androgyny" in the sense described below. In Western philosophy and aesthetics, the term "androgyny" refers to the ideal synthesis of male and female.[7] And since Plato, "androgyny" has been viewed as a symbol of truth and beauty, an ideal of primordial totality and oneness. It is in this sense of "oneness" that my term "cultural androgyny" becomes meaningful. In particular, the Ming-Qing literati/women cooperation suggests a literary and cultural state of wholeness and balance arrived at through the joining of *yin* and *yang*. The *yin* and *yang* were not only complementary to each other, but together they redefined the culturally male and female.

One of the interesting phenomena resulting from the cultural androgyny of the Ming-Qing Period was the appearance of many cross-dressed women poets, who often disguised themselves as young male scholars and freely participated in literary and social exchanges with men. These women literally put themselves on display in their attempt to break from the traditional female models of privacy and

domesticity. Their desire to possess and control their own images obviously charmed the contemporary male literati. A case in point is the famous courtesan poet Liu Shi's love of adopting men's attire. The story goes that in 1641, the cross-dressed Liu Shi travelled alone to visit the literary master Qian Qianyi at his famous mansion, the Banyetang. Qian was extremely impressed with the exceptional talents of this "young man." When Qian finally saw through Liu's male disguise, he fell deeply in love with her and proposed to her on the spot. Perhaps under the influence of talented women like Liu Shi, the cross-dressed woman came into a fashion that lasted until the beginning of the 20th century—for example, the two most celebrated women poets in late Qing, namely Wu Zao (ca. 1800-1855) and Qiu Jin (1876-1907), were both cross-dressed women.

Thus, it is hardly surprising that cross-dressing had become one of the most popular tropes in Ming-Qing romantic fiction and drama. For example, in his short play "The Female *Zhuang Yuan*" the Ming literatus Xu Wei (1522-94) tells the story of a young woman who wins first place in the imperial examination by dressing as a man. (Women were not allowed to take such examinations.) She eventually marries the prime minister's son, who stet also won the first place in a later examination. The dramatist then sums up his message in a couplet toward the end of the play: "The female *zhuangyuan* and the male *zhuangyuan* / Are destined to marry in the residence of the prime minister."[8] Later during the Qing, the woman poet Chen Duansheng (1751-1796), in her song narrative *Zaishengyuan*, tells of a woman who tries to find a balance between her love for a man and her attraction to an official career, which she successfully obtains while disguised as a man. But in real life the cross-dressed women poets wanted to have it both ways: to gain access to the world of the male literati while keeping their female sexuality intact. Cross-dressing, indeed, can be seen as a manifestation of cultural androgyny, an interesting and ambiguous means to blur previously existing gender lines.

As the Ming-Qing period progressed, we have ample evidence that women pursued their poetic careers and other cultural activities as though they were men, without abandoning their femininity and

sexuality. Unlike some American feminists who are anxious to see that women have a literature or criticism of their own (what Elaine Showalter called "gyno-criticism),[9] Ming-Qing women poets considered themselves part of the "literati culture," in which men and women worked *together* to promote women's writings. These women writers were proud to model their works on great male masters such as Tao Qian, Wang Wei, and Du Fu, just as the character Li Daiyu has done in the novel *The Story of the Stone*. In addition, they were extremely erudite and emphasized the importance of literary allusions in poetry-writing, again reminding us of the female characters in *The Story of the Stone*. Thus, in life as well as in art, we can see how Ming-Qing women poets were influenced by the male literati tradition.

Unsurprisingly, these literary, erudite Ming-Qing women poets became bookworms; some of them did virtually nothing but read. They even coined a term "*shuchi*" (literally "book addict") to describe their unqualified devotion to reading and studying. They were obsessed with learning, so much so that their life seemed to depend on it. For example, a famous woman poet called Qian Huixiang, after being ridiculed for her "book addiction," composed a poem to declare her lifelong wish to be a "female bookworm" (*nü shu chi*).[10] Another poet Zhang Roujia surrounded her bed with all kinds of books and often read until after midnight. In one of her poems she prayed that she be granted the luxury of reading for the rest of her life (*WS*, 4: 573). All these women enjoyed reading for reading's sake without any ambition for worldly success, an attitude that was shared by many male literati who had abandoned the desire of any access to officialdom.

Still, most Ming-Qing women poets were "literary domestics" because they were basically women of home, even though they functioned in an untraditional fashion.[11] For them, life's greatest challenge was to find leisure time for reading and writing amidst a daily routine over-full of domestic duties. Thus, some women poets considered illness as a kind of privilege, a privilege which gave them time and leisure for reading and poetry-writing. They even invented a term *qinghuan* (pure joy) to describe the feeling of self-contained solitude

afforded by occasional illness. Chanting during illness, the woman poet Li Liying wrote: "Were it not because I've indulged so much in reading, I wouldn't have found so much 'pure joy' in illness" (*WS*, 4: 695).

For many well-educated women during the Ming-Qing, married life could be the key obstacle to continuous literary creativity and the achievement of cultural androgyny. Indeed, many talented young women abhorred the thought of getting married. So prevalent was this feeling that the familiar figure of the female genius in the Ming-Qing was one who died before marriage—such as the talented Ye Xiaoluan (1616-1632) who died at sixteen, only five days before her wedding. (In the novel, *The Story of the Stone*, Lin Daiyu shares a similar kind of fate.) A most poignant case was Xia Yilan who died at the age of fourteen; and long before her death, she "vowed never to get married" (*WS*, 4: 701). To literary poets like Xia Yilan who were extremely privileged in childhood education, marriage was like a sudden catastrophe. Before marriage, there was joy and peace and endless time for poetry; after marriage, nothing but the trappings of daily life.

However, it is wrong to assume that all of the Ming-Qing women poets suffered bad marriages, for it was precisely during the Ming-Qing period that an amazingly great number of ideal marriages between talented men and gifted women appeared. Among the most celebrated "gifted wives" were some of Yuan Mei's prize disciples such as Xi Peilan, Jin Yi (1770-1794) and Wu Qiong-xian.[12] These matches of "talented husband and gifted wife" centering on the nurturing of poetic and artistic creativity vividly reminds us of the ideal match of Liu Shi and Qian Qianyi.

This said, it still remains that complicated domestic duties required of marriage life were often insurmountable obstacles to women's literary creativity. This Fact explains why a large percentage of the distinguished women poets in the Ming-Qing were widows whose simplified life gave them the time and energy for poetry-writing. For example, Fang Weiyi (1585-1668) and Fang Weize, the two aunts of the famous literatus Fang Yizhi, were both widowed at a very young age and both lived until their eighties, spending most of

their leisure time composing poems and compiling women's anthologies. Other distinguished widow-poets include Shang Jinglan (1604-?), Gu Ruopu (1592-ca. 1681), Song Wanxian, Hu Shenyi, Wang Caiping, and Zuo Xixuan (fl. after 1850).[13] Indeed for the Ming-Qing women poets, widowhood, though perhaps painful in many ways, was extremely beneficial to literary creativity. because widowhood made it possible for many Ming-Qing women to escape from the routines of everyday life and to nourish a life of solitude that was conducive to literary imagination. It was a sad fact of life for these women. What the German poet Rilke said about the correlation between solitude and poetry-writing seems to apply in this case: "Love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain it causes you."[14] Certainly, Wen Shi (fl. ca. 1600), a young widow from Shaanxi, did precisely that. After the death of her husband Ge Dashou, Wen Shi felt terribly lonely, as she wrote in the preface to her poem-series "In Imitation of the *Li Sao*": "And then, alas, I experienced the griefs of the ode 'Bo zhou' [the early death of my husband]. A similar misfortune befell my aunt. My loneliness was more desolate and terrifying than the steep climb up a twisting peak!"[15] And yet Wen Shi was able to turn the sorrows and slights of her young widowhood into beautiful verse. Her poems stand out from those of her contemporaries by virtue of being modeled after the great literary canon *Li sao*, which is a long personal lament by Qu Yuan (fl. ca. 315 B.C.) noted for its striking intensity of lyricism. Like Qu Yuan who expresses his unchanging loyalty to his king, Wen Shi vows eternal fidelity to her diseased husband:

> . . . I lack the will to arrange my hair or my appearance
> But my mind is sincere and will not change.
> Desiring the mystic wind of the Great Purity,
> I shall set my hand on my woman's armory and swear to keep my old vow.
> Recoiling from all lust for filth and muck,
> I praise "The Green Robe" and preserve my good name.
> I knock at heaven's gate, and it opens for me;
> Welcomed, I pay homage to the Female Spirits.

I look up to the blaze of the southern Heavenly Throne,
Then turn towards the spot whence my slight frame had its birth.
Renewing the past so as to leave a name for the future,
I trim my compositions and reveal my thoughts.
Should my coming into this world not have been entirely in vain,
I may look at my shadow and not feel shame for its shape.
(From Poem #2, "A Memory of the Xiang River")

. . . From my jade mirror I brush away the fine dust:
How pure and brilliant its empty light!
I gaze upon this holy and mysterious object:
Revealer of impurities and terror of false hearts!
Bronze prized in the time of the Yellow Emperor
For pure luster as of emerald depths!
Alas, that my own fresh coloring should so rapidly fade!
But my inch of heart will never change.
Riches and fame I have thrown to the vulgar without;
To shape my acts in accordance with ritual is my only vow.
At the cock's first crow I have already dressed,
And I watch the break of dawn in the east.
Far from me, the side-paths of the robber Zhi!
I follow the sages of old and take as my teacher the maiden Yijiang . . . [16]
(From Poem #9, "Brushing the Jade Mirror")

Indeed, we may say that Wen Shi's poem series is a powerful rewriting of the *Li sao*. By reenacting the Confucian virtue of loyalty, Wen Shi has in fact become a female Qu Yuan. But her femaleness has added a new dimension to the *sao* tradition: unlike the male poet Qu Yuan who uses the female persona to frame his poem as a political allegory, Wen Shi speaks a language of her own. Her femininity is autobiographical rather than allegorical, and the effect created is

something more concrete, more confessional, and certainly more filled with everyday detail.

However, the lifestyle of many Ming-Qing widows made them free from the conventions of mere femaleness. An important aspect of widowhood is that the life of solitude has turned many widows into bookworms. Again, Wen Shi's is a case in point—in the preface to her poem-series, she wrote: "Forgetful of sleep and food, I read through the night with a single lamp in my hand."[17] In a way, these women had become the true "female literati" of the Ming-Qing period. Under the influence (and encouragement) of male scholars like Yuan Mei, many Ming-Qing widows, more than ever before, became socially and intellectually assimilated into the circles of male literati. In other words, these widows, who were free from the conventional domestic rituals, pursued a literary and intellectual life as though they were male scholars. They certainly did not believe that women poets should function in a separate domestic sphere. What they had created was a kind of cultural androgyny through which they attempted to become true literary persons, no longer the mere opposites of the male.

For all their desire to become serious creative writers, however, few of the Ming-Qing women can be said to be real "feminists." The voice they express in poetry is not one of claiming difference; it certainly does not serve to challenge the so-called "construction of patriarchal ideology." Their voice in poetry is a voice of sudden realization, a realization that life's value lies in its very vulnerability and transitory existence and that everyone is, in the last analysis, alone. Their nature poems are especially characterized by a self-reflexive tone, assuming a timeless quality that reminds us of the male poets Wang Wei and Tao Qian. Let us now consider two such poems by Sun Yunfeng (1764-1814), a female disciple of Yuan Mei:

STARTING AT DAWN
Under the waning moon
In the dawn—
A frosty bell.

My horse's hooves
Tramp through the yellow leaves.
As the sun rises
Not a human being is visible
Only the sound of a stream
Through the misty trees.[18]

THE TRAIL UP WU GORGE
The trail climbs in zig-zags
High above spiralling whirlpools.
Swift waters break against sheer rocks.
On the evening breeze comes the sound
Of a boy playing his flute
Riding home on the back of an ox.
The last drops of rain mingle
With the cloud of my horse's breath.
New grass grows on the ancient ramparts.
On the abandoned monuments
The old inscriptions are lost in time.
I am bound on a journey without end,
And can not bear the song of the cuckoo.[19]

Several things come to our mind when reading these two poems. First, the poems describe in vivid, simple language the scene of nature. Second, the poet finds a point of balance between solitude and communion, between retreat and return, and between present and past, signified by the abandoned monuments and old inscriptions that are lost in time. In their poetic world of retreat, women like Sun Yunfeng had learned something to carry back into their worldly life. It was this kind of realization coming from poetry and nature that made it possible for them to be free from the traditional image of the abandoned woman, or that of the victimized and vicious woman. The Ming-Qing women poets found that, as female literati, they were free to develop new perspectives on life. They seemed to have realized that true identity could be found in creative activity.

No wonder the Ming-Qing male literati, who felt themselves marginalized, were greatly inspired by the works of these women poets. Many Ming-Qing men even argued that women are naturally endowed with a talent for poetry-writing, "like mountains being naturally firm and compact, and water being naturally clear and deep."[20] Some literati even proposed that poetry is nothing but an expression of the female quality, a quality which they called *qing* (spiritual purity). What is ironic is that *qing* was primarily viewed as a male quality in literature and philosophy before the Ming-Qing period. But now women were praised as being endowed with this quality of *qing* (which David Hawkes translates as "the pure, quintessential humor" in the *Story of the Stone*.) In fact, one scholar even suggested that female poetry, created out of the spirit of such purity and hence devoid of any political affiliations or biases, could be used as an ideal remedy for the confusing array of literary positions and schools in the Ming.[21] In any case, both men and women in the Ming-Qing began to view *qing* as their shared tenet in poetry-writing. In *qing* the marginalized male literati realized their idealized notion of the feminine, while the women poets gained from it a new sense of wholeness and balance derived from the joining of the male and female perspectives. In a way, then, *qing* has become a literary metaphor for the cultural androgyny that I have discussed above, a culture that embraces both men and women, or even, perhaps, that which is beyond men and women.

NOTES

* The paper is based on a lecture delivered at the Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut on April 10, 1995 under a slightly different title. The lecture, sponsored by the Asian Studies Program, the Women Studies Program and the Women's Center, was addressed to the Trinity community on its 25th anniversary of coeducation. I would like to express my special thanks to Mary Ellen Friends for offering suggestions on the revision of my lecture.

[1] See Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* (1957; rev. ed. Shang-

hai: Shanghai Guji chubanshe, 1985).

[2] For Ming-Qing women who burned their own poems, see my "Ming-Qing Women Poets and the Notions of 'Talent' and 'Morality,'" manuscript, 1992, 7-8. Forthcoming in R. Bin Wang, et. al. eds., *Culture and State in Chinese History: Conventions, Conflicts and Accommodations*, (Stanford: Stanford UP).

[3] See my forthcoming "Ming-Qing Anthologies of Women's Poetry and Their Selection Strategies," in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford UP) and "Liu Shih and Hsü Ts'an: Feminine or Feminist?" in *Voice of the Song Lyric in China*, ed. Pauline Yu (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 169-187.

[4] Various sources have proven that Ming-Qing men were truly interested in writings by women. See my "Ming-Qing Anthologies of Women's Poetry and Their Selection Strategies"; and Ellen Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China," *Late Imperial China* 10.2 (1989): 22.

[5] Kang Zhengguo, "Bianyuan wenren de cainü qingjie ji qi so chuanda de shiyi—'Xiqing Sanji' chutan," *Jiuzhou xuekan* (*Chinese Culture Quarterly*) 6.2 (1994): 87-104.

[6] Translation adapted from Mark Borer, "Epitaph for Jin Xianxian," in Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, eds., *Chinese Women Poets: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (New Haven: Yale UP, forthcoming).

[7] Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990) 21-22. It should be noted, however, that some feminists argue that androgyny has been a construction of patriarchal ideology, and thus a conservative, even a misogynistic ideal. See Kari Weil, *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference* (Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 1992) 63.

[8] See my book, *The Late Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-lung: Crises of Love and Loyalism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991) 15.

[9] See Elaine Showalter, "American Questions," in her *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Ox-

ford: Oxford UP, 1994) 1-21.

[10] Xu Shichang, *Wanqingyi shihui* (1928; rpt. Beijing: Zhongguo Shudian, 1988) 4: 640. Henceforth abbreviated as *WS* in the text.

[11] I am indebted to Mary Kelley for the term "literary domestics." See Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) viii-ix.

[12] Their husbands were Sun Yuanxiang, Xu Shanmin, and Chen Zhushi, respectively. For discussions of their ideal matches and others, see Kang Zhengguo, *Fengsao yu yanqing* (Henan: Renmin Chubanshe, 1988) 341.

[13] For the literary careers of Shang Jinglan and Gu Ruopu, see Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chamber: Women and Culture in Seventeenth China* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994) 65, 231.

[14] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Boston: Shambhala, 1993) 56.

[15] Wen Shi, "In Imitation of Li Sao," trans. Haun Saussy, Kang-i Sun Chang, and Haun Saussy, eds., *Chinese Women Poets: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism.*

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] From Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung, trans., *Women Poets of China* (New York: New Directions, 1982) 70.

[19] Rexroth and Chung 71.

[20] Shen Quan, in his foreword to Zou Siyi, comp., *Shiyuan ba ming jia ji* (preface dated 1655) 2a.

[21] Zhong Xing, ed., *Mingyuan shigui.* See Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao*, 2nd ed. (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1985) 883.