

families"; a tendency to further non-bureaucratic, local and parochial interests; gentry patronage and an upsurge in temple-building. The main difference probably lies in the much larger size of the local gentry in the late Ming, coupled with an adverse political climate and a wider scale of cultural expression.

The late Qing presents a quite different picture. Since the late 17th century, after the consolidation of Qing rule and the reinforcement of Confucian orthodoxy, Buddhist patronage became marginalized, and the increased government control of the countryside further curtailed the gentry's attempts to achieve a measure of local autonomy.

However—and that is the final conclusion—gentry resistance had always been a shaky affair. By being, in principle, an elite that derived its prestige and privileges from a state agency—the examination system—it could never develop into a real counterforce: “gentry society remained ineluctably tied to what it resisted” (p. 329).

Praying for Power is a major contribution. In spite of the restriction that Prof. Brook has imposed upon the subject matter, the book contains a wealth of observations and insights of a much wider import that make it required reading for any student of Chinese religion and of the social and intellectual history of late imperial times. At the same time it raises important questions that still have to be answered, and provides a stimulus to future research.

ERIK ZÜRCHER
Leiden University

Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in 17th-century China*, Stanford University Press, 1994. 395pp. paperback £12.95

Teachers of the Inner Chambers is a long awaited book on the history of women in China. Its aim is to refresh our understanding of women's history as well as the social history of 17th-century China. Ko intends to demolish the cliché of the repressed woman that was imposed on Chinese historiography since the May-Fourth movement, while not leaving any room for simplistic optimism.

This book is essentially about highly educated women from the upper classes and the world of entertainment in the Jiangnan region. It is composed of three parts and seven chapters. The first part, named “Social and Private Histories” contains two chapters, one on book printing, and the other on women's printed writings inspired by the famous Ming drama, *The Peony Pavilion* by Tang Xianzu. The second part, named “Womanhood,” also contains two chapters, one on new career possibilities, including teaching and writing, given to female literary talents, the other on the discussions of the content and goals of women's education. The last and third part, named “Women's Culture,” contains three chapters examining, respectively, three types of communities or networks that literate women created: domestic, social and public, and transitory communities where the gentry wife and the professional entertainer met.

Ko chooses her period with care. Repeatedly, she reminds us of the increasingly blurred lines between traditional or theoretical dualities of the time, like inner/outer, male/female, high/low, and so on. It was during this period of intriguing ambiguities that women, especially educated women of the upper classes, found new means of self expression. However, Ko immediately warns us against drawing overly simplistic conclusions from this fact. She argues that new professional opportunities then given to women, instead of undermining the existing Confucian system, actually helped to enforce it. In Ko's own words, “The resilience of the 17th-century gender system depended not on its repressive ability to silence women but on the exact opposite—the opportunities it allowed for diversity and plurality of expression.” (p. 292) Much of the book is built around this central idea, with numerous examples, skillfully narrated and sophisticatedly analyzed.

The main strength of Ko's book lies in several points: the detailed descriptions and analyses

of women's publications, the reconstruction of the lives of literate women of different walks of life, and the discussion on the tensions between "gender" and "class."

With perspicacity, Ko begins her narration with a chapter on the publishing boom of this period. The flourishing book publishing industry and the trendy urban culture that it helped shape were indeed distinct features of the period under study, and formed the essential background to the changes that were to follow. The blossoming of the cult of *qing*, conveyed in major literary works of the time, notably Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion*, attracting an ever growing female readership and even authorship, influencing the thoughts and behavior of numerous women, owed greatly to the prosperous publishing industry, and to the commercialization of printed books.

Through their printed words, Ko reconstructs the lives of numerous female literary talents of the 17th century. For the first time, one reads in a single work the fascinating stories of a great number of interesting, highly educated Chinese women. Many, like Gu Yurui of Hangzhou and Shang Jinglan of Shanyin formed literary circles; some, like Huang Yuanjie, Wang Duanshu, Ni Renji, and Wang Wei traveled around the country to teach, or to sell their poems and paintings, making a decent living for their families, or simply for the pleasure of tourism; others, like Liu Rushi, a former courtesan, associated with the dramatic loyalist movement during the dynastic change. Through their lives, one not only sees the tremendously complex social fabrics of 17th-century Jiangnan, but also realizes how much its social and cultural history owed to these brilliant women actors. The myth of the passive, suppressed, and submissive home-bound woman is definitely shattered.

Ko also reconstructs for us the inner emotional worlds of some of these outstanding women, essentially through ways in which *The Peony Pavilion* was read and understood by women. From the obsessive readers of Wu Wushan's "three wives," to the mysterious Xiao Qing, women fans of the famous drama "affirmed that *qing* is an overarching principle governing all human relationships." (p. 84) Indeed, the cult of *qing* created a positive image of the intelligent, talented and sensual woman, inducing many to yearn for companionate marriages and for fuller emotional lives. Ko also makes insightful remarks on the link between the cult of *qing* and the fad of love suicides, as well as the height of chaste widow cult of the period.

It is in the section on gentry wives and courtesans that Ko deals with the difficult issue of the tensions between "gender" and "class." By showing how the courtesan and the wife cultivated the same feminine virtues to please the pleasure-seeking man, how the wife imitated the fashion trends from the pleasure quarters, and how women from the two different worlds established friendship, Ko analyzes the ways in which women of that time elaborated on a notion of "women-as-same" (gender) that overlaid the divisive categories of class. She reminds us, however, that this emergence of female gender as "one of the principles of social organization and definition of personhood co-existed with divisive forces within the women's communities." (pp. 273-274) This again consistently conforms to her central point that the existing Confucian system was flexible enough to allow for new changes that only helped to strengthen it.

Ko has nonetheless left us with a few questions, especially on the definitions of womanhood. One of them would be the extent to which some of the features described were novel in the 17th century. The emphasis on the classification of women according to their physique (beauties/ugly) discussed in chapter 4 of part 2, for example, seems to be an old fixation already expressed in Tang-Song encyclopedia, and could hardly be considered as a "psychological need to distinguish the physical appearance of man and woman amid a time of confused status symbols and gender norms." (p. 116) Similarly, there were also eminent examples in earlier periods illustrating the paradoxical coexistence of the valorization of woman's talent and the suspicion of female literacy, women's role as moral guidance, women who took up "manly" tasks, and even the appreciation of companionate marriages. The reader is thus left with a desire to know the specific ways in which the 17th century was new or unique in the cultural construct of gender in these aspects.

A few terms are also difficult to grasp: the “privatization” of Chinese life, or “return to the family” discussed also in chapter 4, for instance. If lineages became an important arena in the Ming-Qing period, bolstered by official discourse, they were there more for “public” than for “private” concerns and activities, in the Western meanings of both terms. It is also quite difficult to prove that public men then sought solace in domestic life as a haven of rest more than in earlier periods. In the same context, the term “privatized learning” as applied to transmission of knowledge within the family poses questions (was learning more “privatized” than in earlier periods? What was then the alternative of “public” learning?). I guess the confusion comes from the typically Western duality of private/public that is difficult to apply to 17th-century Chinese society without some explicit modifications and re-definitions. For the same reasons, it is not easy to conceptually differentiate the “social” from the “public” communities that women formed outside the domestic sphere described in chapter 6 of part 3.

Despite these minor details, this book will certainly be considered an important landmark in the historiography of Chinese women’s history. Combining modern gender theories with rich historical facts, Dorothy Ko is successful in telling stories that would stimulate the rethinking of the role of women in Chinese history for a long time to come.

Angela Ki Che LEUNG
Sun Yat-sen Institute for Social Sciences
and Philosophy, Academia Sinica
Taipei