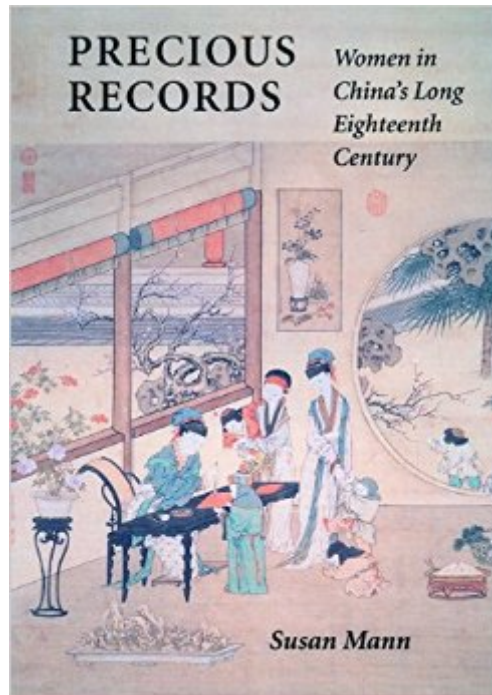


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Precious Records: Women In China's Long Eighteenth Century



Synopsis

This first book-length study of gender relations in the Lower Yangzi region during the High Qing era (c. 1683-1839) challenges enduring late-nineteenth-century perspectives that emphasized the oppression and subjugation of Chinese women. Placing women at the center of the High Qing era shows how gender relations shaped the economic, political, social, and cultural changes of the age, and gives us a sense of what women felt and believed, and what they actually did, during this period. Most analyses of gender in High Qing times have focused on literature and on the writings of the elite; this book broadens the scope of inquiry to include women's work in the farm household, courtesan entertainment, and women's participation in ritual observances and religion. In dealing with literature, it shows how women's poetry can serve the historian as well as the literary critic, drawing on one of the first anthologies of women's writing compiled by a woman to examine not only literary sensibilities and intimate emotions, but also political judgments, moral values, and social relations. After an introductory chapter that evaluates the historiography of Chinese women, the book surveys High Qing history, charts the female life course, and discusses women's place in writing and learning, in entertainment, at work, and in religious practice. The concluding chapter returns to broad historiographic questions about where women figure in space and time and why we can no longer write histories that ignore them.

Book Information

Paperback: 340 pages

Publisher: Stanford University Press; 1 edition (May 1, 1997)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0804727449

ISBN-13: 978-0804727440

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (2 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #702,815 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #76 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Poetry > Regional & Cultural > Asian > Chinese](#) #179 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > World Literature > Asian > Chinese](#) #1069 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Asia](#)

Customer Reviews

To an even greater extent than in the West, the views of Chinese women have been seldom heard; Susan Mann's book attempts to correct that for women of the Qing Period (1644- 1911) although she

comfortably moves back and forward in time to other periods. To an admirable degree, she succeeds in her task. She brings together primary sources from women themselves where possible but does not hesitate to supplement those sources with the work of male writers, often court officials, where necessary. Speaking of gender, a cover blurb (and to some extent the Introduction with its use of terms like 'male gaze' etc.) could suggest that this is a 'feminist' work. To view it as such would be a mistake; Mann is a highly respected scholar who happens to be of the female gender and she 'tells it like it was' without emphasising either sentimental or ideological aspects of the lives of Chinese women. Without wishing to downplay her obvious and genuine concern for feminine issues, she can only be described as a 'feminist historian' in the way that, say, Ursula LeGuin is a feminist writer of fantasy and science fiction or Alison Jolly a feminist writer on human evolution or biology. The work is clearly directed towards students of Chinese history but is well written and should be enjoyable to anyone with a serious interest in China (and with a little perseverance). Some chapters are dense and scholarly, like Chapter 4 on 'Writing' which explores many primary sources, whilst others read quite smoothly. This is not a criticism; just a fact of life for such a work. Mann does everything possible to ease the burden for her readers with, for example, many pertinent illustrations, references largely moved to comprehensive Endnotes and an English-Chinese character list. The book does not attempt to cover all areas of Qing history (thankfully) but covers the areas it promises to in great detail- a reader can ask for little more. Recommended.

I am glad to see this book, because this book is the first book-length study of women during the High Qing. I think this book does not fulfill what it promises in the introduction -- to challenge the lens of Orientalism. It is true that the book goes beyond the paradigm of oppression and subjugation and examines farm household, courtesan entertainment, religion, etc., but it tries too hard to claim a voice for Chinese women. Who is the author to "recover" Chinese women's voice? In reinventing the "traditional" woman, the author perpetuates the gaze on women. There are some complexities of different "types" of women, but the author lacks a critical self-reflection. After all, what alternative is she bringing in to replace Orientalism?

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