‘Talent’, ‘Virtue’ and an Eighteenth-Century Educated Chinese Woman

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Introduction

For women to achieve excellence in poetry is more difficult than it is for men, just as it is also as difficult for women to achieve a good reputation.¹

With these words the Jiangnan poet/painter Luo Qilan (courtesy names: Peixiang, Qiuting, 1755— after 1813) summed up the issues which were central to the writing of her Preface to Poems to the Studio for Listening to the Sounds of Autumn from My Companions in Women’s Quarters, published in 1797. In late eighteenth-century China there was a desire amongst the predominantly male literary establishment for the women they associated with to have the moral refinement (de ‘virtue, moral excellence’) that came from intellectual achievement. Chinese society was a highly literate one, and the writing of poetry was in itself the pinnacle of one’s moral refinement. Through the written word one could establish one’s links with previous cultured generations and ensure a place in the literary canon of the future. A question that arose in established intellectual circles was how to deal with the increased presence of talented (cai ‘talent’) women and their writings. The concern of women like Luo Qilan to maintain their respectability whilst engaging in the public act of writing, then, is central to the English language historiographical tradition of late imperial China.²

Luo’s writings are valuable for several reasons. They provide a window into her life and thoughts. This assists us in reconstructing the social context in which late eighteenth-century Chinese women lived and worked, and connecting those women with the greater structures and dynamics of the society in which they lived. Further, a close reading of Luo’s works, particularly the Preface to Poems from Companions reveals her response to the undercurrents and tensions caused by the increasing entry of women into the male, public world.

Two events which would have had an enormous influence on her public status, and the writing of her Preface occurred at approximately the same time as the young widow Luo Qilan was putting her thoughts into print.³ First, in 1796, was
the inclusion of a selection of her poems in *Poems by the Female Disciples of the Master of Sui Garden, Suiyuan núdizi* by Yuan Mei (courtesy names: Zicai, Jianchui, Cunchai, Suiyuan, 1716–98) the famed literary figure. The second major event which is likely to have prompted Luo into expressing her views on the unequal treatment of women was the publication of an attack on *Poems by the Female Disciples* by the philosopher and historian Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801). In his essay entitled ‘Women’s Learning’ (‘Fuxue’), written between 1797 and 1798, Zhang hit out at Yuan Mei-Luo’s teacher and mentor.

Yuan Mei, variously described as a philanderer and a brilliant scholar gentleman, was one of the main protagonists in the mid-Qing for women’s education. In his *Poems by the Female Disciples of the Master of Sui Garden*, Yuan brought together the writings of twenty-eight of his female students. Luo comes third in order, in *juan* (‘chapter’) 3. Fifty three of Luo’s poems were selected and follow the same sequence as in her original work. Being anthologised in Yuan’s collection was a lasting and visible reminder to these women, and the world at large, of their connection with this renowned figure. The support Yuan showed to women in developing their intellect, however, was in direct conflict with the ideas of Zhang, not because the latter believed women should not have access to education, but because he advocated a form of education for women that adhered to the Confucian rites and which, by its nature, ensured women were kept separate from the world of male learning. In his writings, Zhang set out in no uncertain terms that the harbouring of young female and male students by Yuan Mei was immoral. It was Zhang’s assertion that the quest for fame and reputation by women was immoral that proved to be the opposite of the behaviour formulated and practised in everyday life by Yuan’s student Luo Qilan.

The public attack on her patron, Yuan Mei, took place after Luo had already written her *Preface to Poems from Companions* and while she was still in the midst of completing her own collection of poems and short essays *Poems from the Studio for Listening to the Sounds of Autumn* (six *juan*, hereafter referred to as *Poems*). This collection can be dated over a period of at least six years, from Yuan Mei’s preface of 1795, to one of Luo’s last few poems dated 1801. We can surmise, however, that her publication activities, together with those of other women of the era, were a key factor in the strong condemnation by Zhang Xuecheng. Apart from the publication of *Poems by the Female Disciples of the Master of Sui Garden*, which reflected on his own name, Yuan Mei also encouraged Luo herself to publish and urged her to get into print while he was still alive. The publishing of his collection served Yuan’s ends as well. It provided immediate proof on which Yuan could base his argument that women’s poetry was superior to men’s because it expressed emotion, or sentiment, (*qing*). But for the self-confident and ambitious women in Luo’s group, inclusion in Yuan’s anthology was not the pinnacle of their writing careers. Several, like Luo, published their own collections; the poems and letters in *Poems from Companions* were exchanged between Luo Qilan and seventeen other women poets, most of whom were known as writers in their own right. It is important to note that Yuan’s publication of the women’s writings was presented in a male framework, and its circulation was in the male public world. Luo’s Preface, on
the other hand, expressed the sentiments of herself and other women—collection of writings by women and for women.

Luo's Preface, written directly before, or during this famous debate, thus provides an insight into the motives and ambitions of these talented women who sought literary fame in the seemingly hostile environment of the late eighteenth century. I contend that the writing of her preface to *Poems from Companions* in 1797 can be seen as a response to the tensions created when women such as Luo Qilan were seeking new opportunities in the social, intellectual environment of the period.

In this paper, then, I address not so much the debates between the two different factions, as their effect on Luo Qilan and other women of the period. Luo asserted her right to associate with Yuan Mei, and to openly show her support for other women. In doing so, she claimed the right to knowledge and fame and the benefits they would bring her. It may well have been the effects of this hostility and suspicion that provided the catalyst for Luo's caustic and defensive comments in her Preface to *Poems from Companions*, reproduced in part throughout this paper. Indeed, these same tensions may have caused Luo, at a later stage, to put down her pen and cease writing. It was Luo's writing that had given rise to her identity and independence—and it was an attack on her mentors and, by extension, her writing, which would have inflicted one of the keenest blows. Thus, in her Preface she responds to accusations of incompetence, and even plagiarism:

There were those who read my poetry and doubted that I had written it, calling *Poems from the Studio for Listening to the Sounds of Autumn* the work of a plagiarist. I am by nature coarse and unrestrained. When people say my poetry is not carefully written, I feel ashamed but I can accept this. But when people say I am not able to write poetry, I feel rather angry and cannot take their words.9

I contend that Luo Qilan introduces an unusual position in our discussions of changing social conditions for women in the late 1700s. For her to be caught up in the parameters of the social and intellectual environment which later led to the debate between Zhang Xuecheng and Yuan Mei and to write about these matters—to commit herself to print on the very matters they were at odds over—reveals how important it was for herself and other women to have their views heard. It also allows us to evaluate their response as women to the male-centred intellectual and moral discussions of the period. This in turn gives us an idea of how women of the time felt about themselves.

*The Bird Once Trapped within its cage...* 10

*The Steps to Fame*

In the period before Zhang drew up his diatribe against Yuan Mei and made it known in the public, male arena, Luo was herself busily editing and publishing. As well as the three *juan* of *Poems from Companions*, she also edited a collection
As well as the three juan of Poems from Companions, she also edited a collection of writings presented to her on her fortieth birthday in 1797 by male scholars, officials, relatives, and friends entitled Poems of Tribute to the Studio for Listening to the Sounds of Autumn (hereafter referred to as Poems of Tribute). Luo’s main collection of writings (Poems) was published by the Gong family of Jinling, the same family name as Luo’s husband. Both Poems from Companions and Poems of Tribute were published in Luo’s family name. These two collections of writings by members of her female and male communities indicate the wide networks of which she was a member.

The fact that Luo was in a position to respond to the accusations coming from Zhang cannot be separated from her own personal conditions. Luo appeared to be making choices about what she did and said and so we can assume that she also made a choice to remain a widow. It is curious that Luo did not remarry, especially as she was widowed at a very young age. Yuan Mei, for one, was in favour of widows remarrying. This choice cannot be divorced from her strong desire to be famous. She fully understood the dangers of a husband who would not be sympathetic to a sensitive, ambitious writer:

Now, concerning the fate of a young woman: if she is fortunate enough to be married to a man of taste and they are able to compose verses in harmony, he will certainly cherish her writings and ensure they do not disappear. If, on the other hand, she meets a man who is ‘not a [proper] man’, and who does not understand the [hums and chants] tones, he may take her poems and use them to seal pickle jars. Does this not make the transmission of women’s writings difficult?

As a widow, Luo would have been released from the household chores and responsibility of looking after her husband’s parents. This would have given her more time to enjoy personal and social freedom and, indeed, her poems are full of details of outings and visits to scenic spots, of attending parties, and of activities relating to religious festivals. Associated with this freedom was isolation and Luo documents this in her writings. In ‘Fragrant Tea’ she writes:

The whole day, nothing in particular to do, in front of the window, sipping tea, watching the tea leaves floating in the bowl, the bamboo stove bubbling away.

It’s past noon, I wake from a broken dream, the tips of the pines already tinted with the rays of the setting sun.

On the other hand, being a widow in a society where one’s identity was closely allied to the family or clan, would have added tension to Luo’s life. In some instances, such as speaking out for women, she chose to seek an existence outside of the parameters within which women usually trod. She would therefore have found herself walking the fine line between maintaining public respectability and making a literary name for herself. At the same time, she called on the male cultural framework for her own ends. An example of this is
Sounds of Autumn), which is taken from Ouyang Xiu’s eleventh-century poem, ‘Rhapsody on the Sounds of Autumn’. A Chinese reader of Luo’s studio name would immediately associate her with the great historical figure.

**Engagement with men of talent**

Men of talent sit the examinations, rise to the official class, and strive for mastery in poetic circles. Day by day they travel more extensively and consequently the giants of the day come to recommend them. Thus their fame spreads.

Throughout her writings, Luo showed an acute awareness of the privileges available to men and denied to women and how this situation affected her access to education and fame. In order to realise her ambitions she needed the help of a man and Yuan Mei fitted the bill perfectly. His contribution to Luo’s education was not only a development of her writing skills, but also the ‘circulation’ (zhuan) or ‘fame’, to which he could give her access. Yuan, being part of the dominant world of the literati, but also advocating the rights of women to education, is likely to have exposed Luo to new ways of thinking and to a lively intellectual climate. Arthur Waley’s biography of Yuan Mei is full of stories of visitors and protegés coming from afar to stay at Suiyuan. In addition, membership of Yuan Mei’s group of women students would have provided some (but not all) of her social relationships.

At the same time, Luo’s connection with Yuan Mei would also have narrowed her boundaries because she would have been cut off from those (both male and female) who disapproved of Yuan Mei’s behaviour. Her association with Yuan was in direct conflict with how Zhang believed women should behave. Yet, despite the criticism that Yuan Mei incurred for nurturing female students, he had not been the first male scholar of this era to entertain close relationships with those of the opposite sex. Dorothy Ko has analysed the relationship between Suzhou’s Ren Zhaolin (fl. 1776–1823) who also led a group of women students and whose selected works were published as *Selected Verses of Suzhou Ladies [Wuzhong nüshi shichao]* in 1789. Ko makes the point that although Ren was in virtually the same position as Yuan in his association with young women, he did not attract the public outrage that Yuan did.

It is clear that Luo was resistant to Zhang’s idea of education for women—one in which women would spend their days in quiet seclusion. In her Preface Luo makes specific mention of the benefits of ‘fame’, her quest for it, and the blocks put in the way of her search for it. She specifically cited the cloistering of women as inhibiting their intellectual and social development. She recognised the value of seeing and being seen. The region she lived and moved about in, with its network of waterways, was ideal for making the journeys of which she was so fond. On one occasion, for example, Luo travelled eastward by boat to Hangzhou’s West Lake making stops at Wuxi and Suzhou on the way to take in the sights. Her thoughts are recorded in a set of sixteen poems where she writes of the benefits of travel:
Hidden away in her quarters, the people and things she [a woman] sees and hears are few in the extreme. She has no friend to talk things over with nor to study with to develop her native intelligence. With no opportunity to explore the mountains and rivers in order to see the view, her literary talents and virtuosity are, accordingly, not inspired. Without a goodly father and brothers to help her towards finding the source [of poetry] and towards distinguishing true from false, she would not be able to finish her education. Later, when she marries, the time spent looking after her husband’s parents and attending to the trifling details of the household, often leaves her with no opportunity for writing poetry.

Zhang Xuecheng indicated Yuan had an immoral relationship with his female students. In her writings, Luo implied a relationship with Yuan Mei quite different to this. As well as joining in with groups of others, the two frequently went on outings together, or arranged to meet at certain places. Luo was a regular visitor to Yuan’s garden in Jinling, which was a place for literary and social events. In the way she spoke about the garden, Luo displayed a familiarity with it which was certainly not enjoyed by all the students—Xi Peilan, for example only saw Yuan Mei three or four times in her lifetime, but was also counted as one of his disciples.

Near to the end of Luo’s collection, a set of three poems mourned the death of Yuan Mei.

Of a sudden a fine rain drifts across the hazy pines,
Like ‘tears of blood’, the peach blossoms fall.
Time and again I ‘stand in the snow outside your door’.
From this day on, we learned ones will weep at the feel of the spring wind.

From Luo’s poetry and others writing about her involvement with Yuan Mei, it is apparent that it was a love of literature and mutual admiration that drew the two together. Indeed, she wrote of her first meeting with Yuan as one she had dreamed of for years. From then on, Luo was at pains to emphasise the moral and literary worthiness of her relationship with her three teachers—a relationship which was probably not mere coincidence on her part, but a carefully contrived alliance. Each of the teachers was known to be specialised in the arts with skills valuable to the ambitious Luo Qilan. Zeng Yu (1759–1830) was an accomplished painter. The poet/calligrapher Wang Wenzhi (1730–1802) provided tuition in those refined arts, and also gave her the benefit of his deep involvement in Buddhism. This provided the impetus for her devotional studies and legitimised her trips to temples. Wang, like Yuan Mei and Zeng Yu, was prepared to vouch for Luo’s morality by writing prefaces to her works, by inscribing her paintings, and by writing verses in Poems of Tribute. Luo Qilan’s horizontal scroll ‘Three Blossoms’ (which was offered for auction at Sotheby’s, New York, June 1987) depicts peonies and was inscribed by Wang Wenzhi and Zeng Yu.
value of their patronage. In the following section of her Preface, we come to the crux of the matter: Luo faces full on the criticism she has attracted in her liaisons with the three men. The reader can only guess at the hidden agendas being hinted at by those 'discussing' or 'criticising' her.

Occasionally I come out and meet with those great scholars from north and south of the [Yangzi] River, and we contest our poetic skills. In this way, I am able to wipe out the grievances of having my work cast as being plagiarised and put an end to their false words. I took three Masters as my teachers—Yuan Mei, Lan Quan [Zeng Yu] and Wang Wenzhi. I brought out my former writings and implored these three to look them over, and to correct my mistakes. They approved of my ability.

In the world, those who use ears for eyes and dare not believe Lan [Luo Qilan] would certainly not dare to not believe Yuan Mei, Lan Quan and Wang Wenzhi. Therefore those who doubted me were cast aside but those who criticised me became more frequent.

There were those also who said that it was not suitable for women to write poetry, and that Peixiang's [Luo Qilan's] comings and goings with the three Masters in particular were not seemly. I think back to the Book of Songs, in which more than half of the poems were written by women.27

In reality, some of the things Wang Wenzhi and Yuan Mei said about Luo's poetry sound patronising to the present-day reader. Wang Wenzhi, amongst other flattering remarks about her personality, described her poetry as 'straightforward and robust', not traditionally held as qualities of poetic excellence in Chinese thinking. Yuan Mei interspersed praise for her writings skills with praise for the fine pantry she kept and her good housekeeping skills. Further on in her Preface, not satisfied with having vouched for her morality and literary skills, Luo presented a caustic and cutting piece of logic, in the process putting paid to the notion that women were only capable of writing sentimental pieces:

I, Lan, being very familiar with my teachers, consider as the fortune of my lifetime receiving instruction from these masters. Some say it is not suitable for a woman to follow the three masters and exchange poems with them. I say, if it is not suitable for a woman to do this, then it is perhaps not suitable for her to look up to Mount Tai or to the North Polar Star. Those who speak like this should fall silent and laugh at themselves. To not know a person's talent and yet to suspect them, is selfish. To know clearly a person's talent and still suspect it, is cruel. Neither selfishness nor cruelty are functions that people of virtue should bother about.28
'To show Women are not without Talent'

Fig. 1: Qing Dynasty: Ding Yicheng, a painting of Luo Qilan: ‘Viewing Mt. Ping in Springtime’.
Source: *Yiyuan duo ying*, (Gems from Fine Chinese Arts, 1986, p. 37, n. 27).

Until this point I have presented Luo Qilan in the context of the debate taking place in the scholarly community of Jiangnan. But what she did and wrote did not happen in isolation. Her social and family horizons extended beyond the circle of the Garden of Contentment as we see in the portrait above. Luo interacted with her own siblings—at least five sisters and three brothers. Luo had adopted a daughter too, named Zuo Fen, and on the eve that she left home to be married, Luo wrote a set of five poems to capture her emotions on that significant occasion:

I laugh at myself, year after year, so busy attending to my poetry.
All I have in my satchel to give is the poetry of mountains and rivers.
I bring out the clothes I wore for my wedding and press them smooth again.
Layer upon layer, secretly place them in my daughter’s trunk.
In the same set of poems, Luo also shows the sadness that any mother would at her only child leaving home. But, always resourceful, in the next few poems, Luo has shaken off her melancholy and started to teach her maid, Fengxiao, to paint ‘orchids and bamboo'. After two months of practise, Luo says, her protegé has developed ‘a little talent’. 31

As well as being active in family, social and scholarly circles Luo was also a lay Buddhist, observing religious festivals, and going on journeys to temples. An indication of Luo’s expertise in the practises of Buddhism is that she is described as having the status of youpo, ‘a class of women who were proficient in Buddhism but still at home, not nuns’. 32 Luo is described as having a following of ‘intellectuals, officials, family members and female friends’ and Liang Yizhen notes of Luo Qilan: ‘in her middle years she turned to Buddhism and did not engage in poetry and painting lightly/carelessly’. 33

Some recent publications such as Timothy Brook’s *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* suggest monastic patronage served as an opportunity for gentry to associate with each other in a public context and to publicise their common identity as the privileged elite of gentry society. 34 Apart from providing the reason for a pleasurable outing, the temples also had practical uses, for the disposal of the dead and for ensuring that the souls of the deceased were at peace. In one sequence of poems Luo gives us precise details of the circumstances of her father-in-law’s death, and the ensuing arrangements for the funeral which she took upon herself since her husband and his brothers were no longer living. In these poems about her father-in-law, Luo reveals a certain amount of soul-searching about the reasons why she and her husband had moved to Yangzhou, thus leaving the parent to live on his own. 35

Spiritual support was one way of coping with daily life, as was the mutual support of other women. As in eighteenth-century Europe, the women of Jiangnan were using writing to create their identity, and to forge and maintain links with other women. Luo was able to combine religion, writing and friendships with other women in her own search for an identity. This would have involved talking and thinking through their own positions and how they could influence social attitudes towards themselves. For Luo, this culminated in the editing and publishing of *Poems from Companions:*

Of late, whenever evening encroaches upon my curtain, I light the incense and sit in meditation. Through the poetry of talented women from near and far, I am able to remember them. 36 I open up a volume and read through the poems I have exchanged with my companions. Deep feelings beyond the sound of the poems flow around me, as if we are sitting opposite each other. Thus I have collected and edited the poems and handed them over to a publisher. 37 This may cause ignorant people to realise that amongst womankind, there are those who are not without talent, and that it is merely that these women have the added difficulty of making their work known. Is it not true that these people who are measured as worthless, in general the less they see the more they think strange?
In making this collection I feel less fortunate than others in my circle, but I also count myself as fortunate for having my name attached to them through this publication. I consequently set this publication forth.38

Disillusionment

Three Peaked Mountain is part of the Maoshan Range, approximately thirty kilometres southeast of present day Nanjing. Juqu village, Luo’s birthplace, is in Jurong County, at the foot of Maoshan. This mountain is one of the two most important mountains in Daoist history, being the center of Shangqing (‘Supreme Purity’) Daoism. On a journey to the top of Maoshan Luo reflected on her condition as a woman. She felt spiritually and physically inhibited. She subsequently wrote ‘Climbing to the Summit of Maoshan’ to record her feelings:

Long I’ve heard of Three Peaked Mountain, misty and obscure beyond the clouds. 
The middle peak especially rises up steep and beautiful, meeting with the azure evening sky.

I was born in Juqu village. 
Day and night I would gaze skywards to the dense forests. 
What bitter fate to be born a woman and to be handcuffed, having no cause to tread within this immortal land.

This spring my women companions join me. 
We perfume our clothes and prepare to perform the Daoist rites. 
We set out on our pilgrimage, it is our karma telling us to hasten.

The start of the climb is uneven and winding, 
We reach the top and only then see the vista open out. 
I raise my head and the stars crowd in on me. 
I look down and see only mist. 
The trees far off in the distance give the appearance of grass, the clouds skud over my head.

The bird once trapped within its cage, 
Today like a boat emerges from a narrow pass. 
We mortals have the burden of worldly affairs. 
All that you encounter becomes a screen that obstructs you. 
The wise and the worthy equally are imprisoned, even more so for me, a mere woman.

The immortals, in accordance with their pre-destiny, have these auspicious mountains waiting for them.
I should in the end not want worldly relationships—
I sit here for a long time ‘drinking in the morning mist’.\(^{40}\)

In this poem we can perceive the same spirit of resistance to the world prescribed for women by men that she wrote of in her Preface. This spirit contrasts with the disillusionment which pervades Luo’s final poems. Facing a life alone since her daughter had left home, at the end of the sixth juan of her Poems, she also recorded the deaths of her two important patrons, first Yuan Mei in 1798, and then Wang Wenzhi in 1802. These teachers and her male community had vouched for her morality and literary skills throughout her writing career. She knew well the value of connections and she now faced a life without them. Near to the end of the sixth (and final) juan of her work, Luo wrote this preface to one of her poems:

I have studied poetry for half of my lifetime. My ability is poor and my talent minimal. From today, I am not able to join with the other writers in composing poetry. Recently, I have taken a look at painting, and have come to like it somewhat. I have therefore completely stopped writing poetry and taken to painting. I compose this poem merely to record the fact.\(^{41}\)

At the age of forty and in the prime of her writing career, Luo gave up writing and public life and retired to the shelter of her spiritual world. In the poem that Luo wrote saying she was going to give up writing and only paint in the future, she talked of her reason for giving up as moralistic: that one should use words to find The Way (The Dao) and then dispense with them.\(^{42}\) Further into her poem, she says that in order to study the Dao, she needed money for food and clothing. This perhaps indicates that there was more money to be had in painting than writing. Those of Luo Qilan’s paintings which hang in the Palace Museum in Beijing, are dated 1795, 1799, and 1800—indicating that she was painting at the same time as her later writings.\(^{43}\)

Luo had attempted to influence the social order so that she and other women could live a more meaningful existence. And yet she is likely to have found herself as much dependent on the patronage and support of these great men as she was defending herself against the tensions created by her liaisons with them. Near to the end of her Preface she wrote:

I, Lan, am 42 years and recently took a casual glance at the Buddhist scriptures. My mind has travelled through ‘the emptiness’ and gone back to The Way in the desire to console myself. When I hear slander or praise, it rests only lightly on my breast. I only regret that in a former life, I had an excessive regard for fame, and this is precisely why I am the target of their criticism.\(^{44}\)
ROBYN HAMILTON

Summary

In this paper I have sketched an outline of one woman’s response to some of the tensions concerning women and learning in the late 1700s in the Jiangnan region. Debates about ‘talent’ and virtue reached into areas far wider than the writing of poetry. An underlying issue that concerned the intellectual community was how to deal with the increasing participation of women in public life. I maintain that it is only by examining the views of individual women to these issues that we will be in a position to be able to begin to assemble a history which reflects the lived lives of Chinese women. This history would include their reaction to criticisms about the way they lived their lives. The results of this kind of research have only recently started to become available.

The writings of Luo Qilan introduce a unique perspective on three conflicting views on the issues of ‘talent’, ‘virtue’, and educated women during this period. Zhang Xuecheng’s notion that women wrote only to entertain men is disproved when we turn to Luo’s writings which often take on the flavour of a personal diary or a working through of feelings. Much of her poetry was introspective or centred on the family and daily events. Luo did not fit into Yuan’s model either, because he believed that women should write to show their spontaneous desire. It is true that Luo wrote sentiment into her poetry but she was also bold enough to express herself in a forthright (‘unfeminine’) and radical manner. If we take Zhang and Yuan as two of the main commentators on women and writing at that time it is clear that we must also move beyond them and their arguments. If we do not move beyond them, we risk limiting the development of scholarly discussions on women during this period of great social change.

A close reading of Luo’s Preface and her volumes of poetry show that she was prepared to go one step further than that implied by her teacher Yuan Mei, in her quest for personal gain. By voicing her opinions about the disadvantages women experienced because of having to adhere to prescribed social and intellectual roles, and by showing her support for women in practical as well as emotional ways, she stepped outside the idealistic world crafted by these men for their female contemporaries.

In her assertive strivings for a legitimate place in society, was Luo Qilan exceptional for her time? Was it her force of personality which led her to tread the fine line between public exposure and private respectability? Or did this widow write, publish and paint simply as a means of making a living? The challenge, then, is for us to ask how many other ‘unusual’ cases there were and how we are to deal with them in our future work.

Finally, after Luo Qilan had been so vociferous in speaking out about the need for women like herself to write and publish, she retired from the public world of letters. Her voice is only one, but it attempted to establish women’s identity and worthiness in society, and it also rejected the views of those who would try to quell their voices. Whether or not there were other voices awaits further research.
Preface to Poems to the Studio for Listening to the Sounds of Autumn from My Women Companions

For women to achieve excellence in poetry is more difficult than it is for men, just as it is also just as difficult for women to achieve a good reputation.

Why is this? Hidden away in her quarters, the people and things she sees and hears are few in the extreme. She has no friend to talk things over with nor to study with to develop her native intelligence. With no opportunity to explore the mountains and rivers in order to see the view, her literary talents and virtuosity are, accordingly, not inspired. Without a goodly father and brothers to help her towards finding the source [of poetry] and towards distinguishing true from false, she would not be able to finish her education.

Later, when she marries, the time spent looking after her husband’s parents and attending to the trifling details of the household, often leaves her with no opportunity for writing poetry. Men of talent sit the examinations, rise to the official class, and strive for mastery in poetic circles. Day by day they travel more extensively and consequently the giants of the day come to recommend them. Thus their fame spreads.

Now, concerning the fate of a young woman: if she is fortunate enough to be married to a man of taste and they are able to compose verses in harmony, he will certainly cherish her writings and ensure they do not disappear. If, on the other hand, she meets a man who is ‘not a [proper] man’, and who does not understand the [hums and chants] tones, he may take her poems and use them to seal pickle jars. Does this not make the transmission of women’s writings difficult?

And speaking of difficulties, there are others of a different kind.

In my youth I studied poetry with my father. By the time I was eighteen years I understood about how to compose a poem. After I grew up I married Mr Gong and we set up home together. The family fortunes declined and my husband and I had to stop creating poetry and begin to plan how to make a living. Not long after, I became a widow and had to maintain my own household. I moved from Yangzhou to a house in the western part of Dantu. The house was old with only a room or two, and in the evening I tutored young girls. In time, I was gradually able to use painting and calligraphy in place of silk weaving to make a living. In this way, I tasted the bitter life that impoverished people often have. From this time on, those who sought me out to write poetry and to paint increased daily.

There were those who read my poetry and doubted that I had written it, calling Poems the work of a plagiarist. I am by nature coarse and unrestrained. When people say my poetry is not carefully written, I feel ashamed but I can accept this. But when people say I am not able to write poetry, I feel rather angry and cannot take their words.

Occasionally I come out and meet with those great scholars from north and south of the [Yangzi] River, and we contest our poetic skills. In this way, I am able to wipe out the grievances of having my work cast as being plagiarised and put an end to their false words. I took three Masters as my teachers—Yuan Mei,
Lan Quan and Wang Wenzhi. I brought out my former writings and implored these three to look them over, and to correct my mistakes. They approved of my ability. In the world, those who use ears for eyes and dare not believe Lan [Luo Qilan] would certainly not dare to not believe Yuan Mei, Lan Quan and Wang Wenzhi. Therefore those who doubted me were cast aside but those who criticised me became more frequent.

There were those also who said that it was not suitable for women to write poetry, and that Peixiang’s [Luo Qilan] comings and goings with the three Masters in particular were not seemly. I think back to the Book of Songs, in which more than half of the poems were written by women ... If the Great Sage had enforced the moral stand that ‘women’s words should not go forth’ [nei yan bu chu] then these writings would long ago have been edited out and lost to us. But their words have been preserved in the Book of Songs. Why, after all has this been allowed?

Yuan Mei, Lan Quan and Wang Wenzhi—these three hoary men of great repute—are on a par with the great masters of Song moral philosophy. In this empire of ours, those who are able to write poetry compare them to Mount Tai and the North Polar Star. One hundred generations from now there will still be those who have heard of their works and personality and who respect them. I, Lan, being very familiar with my teachers, consider as the fortune of my lifetime receiving instruction from these masters. Some say it is not suitable for a woman to follow the three masters and exchange poems with them. I say, if it is not suitable for a woman to do this, then it is perhaps not suitable for her to look up to Mount Tai or to the North Polar Star. Those who speak like this should fall silent and laugh at themselves. To not know a person’s talent and yet to suspect them, is selfish. To know clearly a person’s talent and still suspect it, is cruel. Neither selfishness nor cruelty are functions that people of virtue should bother about.

I, Lan, am 42 years and recently took a casual glance at the Buddhist scriptures. My mind has travelled through ‘the emptiness’ and gone back to The Way in the desire to console myself. When I hear slander or praise, it rests only lightly on my breast. I only regret that in a former life, I had an excessive regard for fame, and this is precisely why I am the target of their criticism.

But these old habits are difficult to get rid of. Of late, whenever evening encroaches upon my curtain, I light the incense and sit in meditation. Through the poetry of talented women from near and far, I am able to remember them. I open up a volume and read through the poems I have exchanged with my companions. Deep feelings beyond the sound of the poems flow around me, as if we are sitting opposite each other. Thus I have collected and edited the poems and handed them over to a publisher. This may cause ignorant people to realise that amongst womankind, there are those who are not without talent, and that it is merely that these women have the added difficulty of making their work known. Is it not true that these people who are measured as worthless, in general the less they see the more they think strange?

In making this collection I feel less fortunate than others in my circle, but I also count myself as fortunate for having my name attached to them through this publication. I consequently set this publication forth.
Written in autumn, in the second year of Jiaqing reign, [1797]. At Juqu, Luo Qilan, the Lady-scholar Peixiang.

ENDNOTES

1 Luo Qilan, Tingqiu xuan guizhong tongren ji (Poems to the Studio for Listening to the Sounds of Autumn from My Companions in Women’s Quarters), Jinling, Luoshi, 1797 (hereafter referred to as Poems from Companions), Preface p. 1a. My translation of the Preface to Poems from Companions is given in the Appendix. The translations of Luo’s poems throughout this paper are my own.

2 An excellent analysis of the issue of ‘talent’ and its interrelationship with ‘virtue’ can be found in Clara Wing-Chung Ho, ‘The Cultivation of Female Talent: Views on Women’s Education in China During the Early and High Qing Periods’, Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, 38 (2), 1995, pp. 191–223. My research on Luo Qilan is a result of my Master’s work, completed in February 1995. A previous version of this paper was published in Late Imperial China in 1997. The present paper has been written to include the work of Ho (see above), which was published after the completion of my Master’s dissertation.

3 Luo Qilan was born in Juqu, Jurong County in Jiangsu Province, approximately thirty kilometres from present day Nanjing. Her grandfather is noted as being an official and her father taught her poetry. Luo also had two uncles who were attached to teaching academies in Jinling. See Marsha Weidner (ed.), Views From Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists 1300–1911, Indianapolis Museum of Art and Rizzoli International Publications, Indianapolis and New York, 1988, pp. 140–1 for a biographical entry on Luo Qilan and a reproduction of her painting on a fan ‘Orchids, after Yun Shouping’.


6 Luo Qilan, Tingqiu xuan shiji (Poems from the Studio for Listening to the Sounds of Autumn), Jinling, Gongshi, 1796.
7 Luo Qilan, *Tingqiu xuan shiji* (Poems from the Studio for Listening to the Sounds of Autumn), Jinling, Gongshi, 1796
10 This line is from Luo’s ‘Climbing to the Top of Maoshan’, in Luo Qilan (ed.), *Tingqiu xuan zengyan* (Poems of Tribute to the Studio for Listening to the Sounds of Autumn), Jinling, Luoshi, 1796, p. 3.1a), a full translation of which appears later in this paper.
13 Luo, *Poems from Companions*, p. 1a. The word zhuan, ‘to be passed on, to circulate, to be transmitted’, is used several times by Luo in her Preface. The term is an important one in Chinese intellectual thought. See, for example, Stephen Owen (ed.), *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, where he discusses (p. 273) the importance of ‘transmission’ in the *Wenxin diaolong*, the sixth-century treatise on literary art. Wu Pei-yi, *The Confucian’s Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1990, pp. 4-5, shows how the character originally meant ‘to transmit’. By extension, it came to mean a biography, but rather than being merely the ‘representation of a life’, more a way of transmitting to posterity certain aspects of a life. Another term used by Luo in this opening paragraph which highlights the differences in opportunities between men and women is ming, ‘fame’, or ‘name’. See Susan Mann, “‘Fuxue’ (‘Women’s Learning’) by Zhang Xuecheng (1738-1801)’, p. 44, where Zhang Xuecheng regards ming as a corrupting influence on women.
16 See Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994, for the suggestion that literary women took the names of literary men to give them legitimacy.
intellectual, but also emotional, as advocated by Yuan Mei. Mann renders xingling as ‘spiritual power’.
20 Luo, Poems from Companions, Preface, p. 1a
22 Luo, Poems, p. 6.14b.
23 This line refers to a moment in history when two budding scholars sought out the great Song dynasty scholar Cheng I. They were kept waiting in the snow. From then on this line was used to indicate a sincere desire for learning.
24 Luo, Poems, p. 1.12b.
26 See Hummel, 1943, pp. 840–1 for biographical notes on Wang Wenzhi.
27 Luo, Poems from Companions, Preface, p. 2a. Luo then goes on to list the poems from the Book of Songs which were thought to have been written by women. She was not the first to have called on this proof of women’s legitimacy in the world of poetry. Susan Mann (‘Learned Women’, p. 387, n.8), notes that the invoking of the female voices in the Book of Songs was used by Yuan Mei, and consequently led to him being the first to coin the term fuxue, ‘women’s learning’. It is likely that Luo would have picked up this term and the reference to the Book of Songs from Yuan Mei himself.
28 Luo, Poems from Companions, Preface, p. 2a–2b.
29 In using this phrase in the final lines of her Preface, a full translation of which appears in the Appendix, Luo brings to the reader’s mind the phrase ‘nüzi wu cai bian shi de’, ‘lack of talent is a virtue in a woman’, which forms the background to Ho’s ‘The Cultivation of Female Talent’, above. The phrase was first used in the Ming period. For further discussions on this term see, as examples, Joanna F. Handlin, ‘Lü Kun’s New Audience: The Influence of Women’s Literacy on Sixteenth-Century Thought’, in Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (eds), Women in Chinese Society, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1975, pp. 28–9; Liu Yongcong, Nüxing yu lishi (Chinese Women and History), Commercial Press, Taipei, 1993, p. 89.
30 Ibid., 6.1a (2).
31 Ibid., 6.1b.
33 Liang Yizhen, Qingdai funü wenxueshi (The History of Chinese Women’s Literature from the Qing Dynasty), Zhonghua, Shanghai, 1925, p. 91.
35 Luo, Poems, 5.19a, 5.20a.
36 Most of the women in Luo’s Poems from Companions are ‘known’ in that they appear in anthologies of Qing women’s poetry such as Shi Shuyi (compiler), Qingdai guige shiren zhenglue, (Biographies of Qing women poets), Shanghai shudian Shanghai, 1922, reprint 1987. Many of the women who made up Luo’s group are also named in each other’s writings.
37 These lines sum up the sheer determination and hard work that Luo would have gone through. She wrote some 600 poems herself. She then edited and organised the writing and...
publishing of 300 poems by these women and a similar number by her group of male contacts.

38 Luo, *Poems from Companions*, p. 3a. There are some ambiguities in Luo’s meaning here. First, it is not clear why she should feel less fortunate than others—because of her putting her name to the piece or for some other reason. Second, by saying she is fortunate for having her name attached to them she lays herself open to being in exactly the same position as Yuan Mei—making herself famous through the endeavours of others.


40 Luo used the metaphor of going on a pilgrimage to signify her wish to reject the mortal world. This has explicit Daoist reference to the transcendent qualities of the sacred mountains. For notes on the tendency of Ming and Qing intellectual artists to depict a great mountain as an ideal mystical place for a wanderer who seeks a transcendental experience, see Munakata Kiyohiko, *Sacred Mountains in Chinese Art*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1991, pp. 173–4.


43 See Weidner, *Views From Jade Terrace*, p. 182, for details of Luo’s extant paintings.


45 The publication of Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang (eds), *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997, is a welcome addition to the field of the study of writing Chinese women in the period under discussion, and the tensions that their writing introduced to the world of letters. The volume results from the proceedings of the conference on ‘Women and Literature in Ming-Qing China’, held at Yale University, June 1993.