

DOCTORAL THESIS

Self-representation and female agency in Qing China: genteel women's writings on their everyday practices in the inner quarters

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Abstract

This research analyses Qing women's writings and paratexts to explore how women applied their agency to re-shape the nature of everyday practice in the boudoir, arguing that dutiful activities were not only responsibilities for the fulfillment of womanhood, but also a location for self-expression and a channel to cross the boundary of private sphere and public society. The main body of this study examines activities concerning *rong* 容 (appearance) and *gong* 功/工 (achievements/work), the practical aspects in *side* 四德 (four womanly virtues) defined in the Confucian values. In the part about women's appearance, this research will examine women's self-adornment and looking in the mirror, and in the part about women's work, it focuses on garment making and cooking. On this basis, this study rethinks the connotation of "four virtues," and further explores women's agency manifested in their everyday details in the late imperial period.

Scholars in gender history and women's literature have conducted fruitful studies on multiple aspects of women's daily life, such as women's production and consumption, material life, household duties, literary pursuit, leisure activities, and social communications. This research attempts to examine a less-studied aspect of women's self-representation: their subjective experience in the practical aspects of the "four female virtues." How did common practices about *rong* and *gong* relate to women's opinion on body and material, inspire their emotions, and reflect their rich inner reality? How did women empower themselves through these everyday activities and in turn transform duties into a platform of self-construction and self-expression?

This research focuses on the Qing dynasty, a transitional period in history that bridged traditional and modern China, to explore how women's agency was constructed in, manifested through, and embedded in the commonest everyday domestic practices. Specifically, this research focuses on four particular activities that represented *rong* and *gong*: self-adornment, looking in the mirror, garment making, and food management. I argue that women in the Qing dynasty not merely fulfilled but also tactfully transformed the Confucian expectation of "four virtues" through common practices in the everyday, and in the meanwhile, they empowered themselves by creating personally meaningful worlds within the inner quarters.

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