
Jining, Shandong

(1893–1895)

THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE Grand Canal sat at his writing table, his inkstone and brushes buried under a pile of poems. Near the edge of the table lay a long narrow box of faded brocade, fraying at the corners and recently dusted. One of its ivory fastenings was broken. He did not know where the box came from, but he recognized the poems. Over the past several months, he had read them all, line by line, discarding pages he felt were incomplete or written too hastily, saving the margin notes wherever he found them. The poems that survived his scrutiny were the ones now stacked before him, arranged in chronological order. He rifled through them briefly just to reassure himself.

He had resolved in the autumn to publish the poems to honor their author, his children's late governess. She had been in his employ since his brief stint in Henan, where he met her through friends.¹ At the time, she was a widow in the worst possible circumstance: the in-laws to whom she had devoted herself were dead, and her late husband's only heir had not survived. She was utterly alone. It so happened that he needed a governess for his children, born to his young concubine and living with him at the time. But it took some care on his part to extend an offer of employment to a woman of Wang Caipin's upbringing. She had never worked outside her home, nor felt the need to do so, although he was told that she had received pupils in a special room set aside for that purpose in the home of her parents-in-law and by this means had earned a modest income. Facing destitution as she was at the time he met her, however, she needed a respectable place to live. The widows' homes that had sprung up throughout the country in the wake of the Taiping Rebellion were decidedly not to her liking.

So they had reached a genteel agreement, based on the eminence of her family and her distinction as a poet, calligrapher, and painter, as well as his own dignified position and timely need. In the years that followed, he had

grown attached to her. Her elegy for his beloved concubine, composed just a few years before her own death, had sealed their friendship. It was time to repay her.

Her poems were ready. His own last task, composing the preface, stared up at him from the tabletop. Moving the sheets of paper to one side, he carefully dropped water onto the massive inkstone and ground the ink with measured force. Then he selected a favorite brush and wrote. He began with a flourish: a series of grand allusions to the difficulties facing women writers who wished to remain virtuous and above reproach, particularly as widows, and to the many female writers and scholars who had preceded Wang Caipin's own fame as a learned woman. The examples he selected fell nicely into parallel prose as his brush sped over the paper. This prepared him to introduce the author herself: "Wang Caipin was the granddaughter of Zhang Qi and the grandniece of Zhang Huiyan. She was heir to the long tradition of women who transmit classical learning. She grew up in the home of her maternal uncle at Wuchang, where she lived with her mother and her maternal aunt."²

Here Xu Zhenyi embellished his preface with some allusions to other famous learned women of literati families. He knew them all. He pointed out that Wang Caipin had "studied under the tutelage of her aunts: the poet Zhang Qieying and the calligrapher Zhang Lunying." He then supplied appropriate details of the marital connections of these ladies and described the illustrious reputations of all concerned. He dropped the names of the ladies' two most illustrious admirers: the legendary leaders of the victory over the Taiping rebels, Zeng Guofan (1811–1872) and Hu Linyi (1812–1861). Then he began to narrate the life of the author of the poems.

Despite the grand prose in which he chose to celebrate Wang Caipin's work, Xu considered his late governess a modest and understated person. She had lived quietly in her private quarters near his comfortable office in Jining. She enjoyed the company of his concubine, and up until the time of the concubine's death, they all spent an evening together every ten days or so, following the lunar cycle.³ After the concubine died, however, his governess withdrew into her privacy, and he rarely saw her.

The Director-General reflected that he and Wang Caipin were born at nearly the same time. They had lived through the mid-century Taiping Rebellion. They had idolized the same heroes. They had both expected a "restoration" of the grand empire they had known in their youth, led by those very heroes, particularly Zeng Guofan and Hu Linyi.⁴ Xu Zhenyi himself did not acknowledge that the Restoration program was a failure.⁵ But in his

present post, there was no denying that dramatic changes had been transforming the polity beyond recognition ever since the Taiping Rebellion.

Xu Zhenyi's official position was close to the top of the imperial bureaucracy: as Director-General of the Grand Canal, his formal rank was 2a.⁶ But the shifting economy and ecology of the 1870s and 1880s had combined to make his title an empty one. The Grand Canal was no longer the lifeline of the capital's food supply, and the crucial Yellow River crossing that had blocked the Canal with silt since the river's change of course in 1855—the area that was his particular charge—had been nearly erased from the priorities of an imperial government whose concerns now focused on foreign trade along the coast and the growing treaty port sector of the economy.⁷ The governors of Henan and Shandong were now in charge of the political economy of his region, and his own office—he had to face it—was superfluous.⁸

Wang Caipin, he knew, had grown skeptical about the country's future. She began her life as a talented prodigy, celebrated as one of the brilliant *cainü*, or “talented women,” of her time.⁹ She made an excellent marriage in 1850 to an equally talented young man, and even though the marriage took her far from her home and the extended family where she had grown up, the match was a good one. This recollection inspired him to add some conventional phrases on connubial harmony to his description of her married life: “On her dressing table beside her inkstone case were scattered poems, and copies of the *Book of Changes*, *Zhuangzi*, and Qu Yuan's ‘Encountering Sorrow.’” The Director-General wanted to make sure his readers knew that Wang Caipin had married into a scholarly family where the highest standards in women's learning were honored. It was the best way to praise her learned family's choice of a spouse.

Soon after the marriage came the Taiping Rebellion. Wang Caipin's husband had died early in the course of the fighting. She contemplated suicide but realized that she must dedicate herself to caring for her husband's parents and rearing his heir. Her brilliance as a poet had faded somewhat in the pedestrian labor of tutoring and caregiving that followed, although Xu Zhenyi thought many of her late poems were quite fine. Her writing also changed over the years. Her joyful embrace of life as a young woman gave way to grief following her husband's early death. She then achieved a state of graceful resignation during her years of widowhood, as one by one the members of her extended family scattered and died. At the same time, many of her poems showed flashes of anger and frustration at the country's military weakness. This surprised the Director-General only slightly, given what

he knew of her close correspondence with her maternal aunt and her uncle during the years when the Taiping Rebellion raged.

Xu Zhenyi turned back to his preface, in search of the right words to conclude it. A story about the death of the Han official Fan Pang came to mind. Fan Pang's parting words to his mother were: "Life and death, each has its proper place. Do not grieve over this farewell."¹⁰ Pleased with the effect of this final allusion, and relieved that the printing could now proceed, Xu Zhenyi called for his clerk to deliver the manuscript to a scribe. This was only the first stage in a publication process that would yield handsome woodblock editions of Wang Caipin's poetry that he planned to send as gifts to friends, relatives, and admirers of the Zhang family. He congratulated himself for repaying his debt to Wang Caipin in such a satisfying way.

The Director-General had one thing left to do. He turned to the box at the edge of his table, fumbled with the clasps—the broken one gave way easily—and lifted the lid. Inside was a handscroll, tightly rolled and carefully wrapped in fine gauze. He realized at once what it must be. Surely this was the famous painting he had heard so much about from the elderly governess, who loved to recount how the scroll's odd combination of subjects and settings had caused so much comment when it was first painted. This was the original work commissioned by Wang Caipin's maternal uncle, Zhang Yuesun, to celebrate his unique joint family household: one where a brother and his two sisters and their respective spouses and children all lived together under one roof.

Xu Zhenyi called a servant and ordered a low table placed near one wall of his study. He dismissed the servant, settled himself on a mat beside the table, and carefully untied the handscroll, revealing copious inscriptions copied onto the margins at the beginning. Then he began to view it, unrolling it carefully in sections, from right to left. The painting, in ink and color on silk, featured three couples "linking verse in adjoining rooms," as the title had it. Xu wondered briefly how he would be able to identify the subjects, but he quickly saw that the painter had left little to the imagination. The first to come into view were clearly Zhang Yuesun himself and his demure wife, Bao Mengyi. The refinement of their faces, the elegant placement of the objects in their chamber, and their primacy in the order of the handscroll made it plain that this was a portrait of the family head, heir of the paterfamilias, Zhang Qi. The middle section of the scroll showed a separate but adjoining chamber, in which appeared a dignified woman writing calligraphy in the company of a slightly pudgy man. Surely this was Caipin's bumbling Uncle Sun, seated beside his spouse, the renowned woman cal-

ligrapher Zhang Lunying. Xu Zhenyi tried to read more into the painter's rendering of this improbable couple, but he failed to discern even a hint of irony. Of course, he thought to himself, for a family portrait anything less than idealism would have been unthinkable, a gross affront to the family, and a telling indictment of the artist's failure to put duty ahead of feelings.

The final panel in the handscroll showed Wang Caipin's own parents, her father, Wang Xi, and her mother, Zhang Wanying, captured by the painter in an interaction of such subtle amity and intimacy that Xu Zhenyi caught his breath. When he called the servant to rearrange the room, his voice was husky and his manner brusque. Poems and painting together had shown him the hearts and minds of people long dead. He rose and left his study to meditate in the garden.

In the fall of 1893, when the copying of Wang Caipin's manuscript was nearly finished, Xu Zhenyi composed an afterword. His words cast a foreboding light on the history of the Zhang family's learning: "This lady," he wrote, "was the last surviving person to carry on the teachings of her great-uncle, Zhang Huiyan, and her grandfather, Zhang Qi."¹¹ The woodblocks for printing Wang Caipin's collected poems, titled *Duxuan lou chugao*, were finished by the spring of 1894 and published with Xu Zhenyi's own dedication on the frontispiece. Written in an ancient calligraphic style, the dedication was embossed with two of Xu's finest seals.

Later that same year, the Japanese navy routed and sank China's finest warships in a brief battle lasting barely six hours. In 1895 China signed the humiliating Treaty of Shimonoseki, marking the failure of the Restoration's "self-strengthening" movement, and Xu Zhenyi was inspired to compose a letter of remonstrance to the throne. His letter placed his former mentor and Wang Caipin's patron, Zeng Guofan, and his colleague Hu Linyi—their heroes of the Restoration—in a new light:

In days gone by, officials like Zeng Guofan and Hu Linyi had theories that were unsurpassed, and talents that made them indispensable. A true heart was the basis for their actions, and love of the people was their primary concern. Of Western learning (*yangxue*) they said virtually nothing. And they never purchased weapons from abroad. In the end, they were able to pacify a massive rebellion and restore the rule of the imperial government, but only by recourse to the *lijin* commercial tax, which sapped the energy of the people. For the sake of expediency, they stole the people's resources, although—feeling uneasy about this—they planned to halt the *lijin* as soon as the mil-

itary crisis subsided. Their experience should be a cautionary mirror on our time. Because now the entire world is in a state of such turmoil that a man who does not have Western learning cannot be called talented, and a policy that does not address reform cannot be called useful.¹²

The elderly governess Wang Caipin had died just in time. She was not the last of imperial China's cultivated ladies (*guixiu*).¹³ But her family learning had suddenly become obsolete.

The historian says:

Wang Caipin's life, like that of her employer, Xu Zhenyi, was framed by the millenarian movement known as the Taiping Rebellion. From its modest stirrings in 1851 far to the south of Caipin's home, the movement swept into the Lower Yangzi region and occupied it for more than a decade. The Taiping were not fully defeated until 1866, when their self-proclaimed "Heavenly Kingdom" collapsed. The rebellion shocked people like Wang Caipin for reasons beyond the sheer loss of life. Unlike other mass movements of the Qing period, the Taiping movement was not confined to distant borderlands or remote hill areas. Instead, against all odds and despite the presence of powerful Manchu and Han Chinese garrisons deployed to stop them, the ragtag Taiping rebels seized towns and cities of the Lower Yangzi heartland one after the other. At the peak of their power, they controlled all of China's economic heartland, the homeland of governing-class families like Wang Caipin's. As shocking as their improbable military success was the Taiping ideology. Taiping leaders preached a messianic communitarian doctrine derived from readings of the Biblical Old Testament. Their apocalyptic vision rejected Confucian family and social relationships outright. Inspired by Christian missionary tracts that circulated on the streets of Canton, Taiping preachers won converts in the rural hills of Guangxi province, where hundreds of thousands of marginal people packed up their families and joined the quest for a heavenly kingdom in this world. To cap the horrifying spectre of a seditious attack on civilization, the Taiping advocated the overthrow of the ruling Manchu house and the enthroning of their own leader, whom they regarded as Jehovah's second son. For all of these reasons, the movement spelled ruin for the lives of elite families like Wang Caipin's, who faced the choice of fleeing and becoming refugees or standing firm in a walled city to face almost certain death at the hands of the rebels or by suicide.

It is unclear how much people like Wang Caipin knew about the Taiping

following. The Taiping core leadership and initial converts comprised large numbers of Hakka people, a subethnic group whose social practices set them apart from the Han majority. Among themselves, Taiping followers were considered children of the God Jehovah, each one equal in his eyes. Taiping believers attacked the Chinese family system and family relationships, singling out women for special attention, perhaps because of Hakka opposition to Han customs such as footbinding and female seclusion. Taiping armies included battalions of female soldiers with female generals in command, and in occupied areas the Taiping leadership created a civil service examination track to recruit female officials. These policies promoted and preserved the strict segregation of the sexes enforced in the earliest Taiping communities, where men and women were housed separately in dormitories. Moreover, because the original Taiping movement was dominated by Hakkas who did not practice footbinding, Hakka female leaders forcibly unbound the feet of captive Han Chinese women in newly occupied territories.¹⁴

What was well publicized by anti-Taiping leaders like Zeng Guofan was the Taiping program promoting “brotherhood and sisterhood” among all living creatures. Zeng’s announcements and writings to the public about the Taiping underscored the inflammatory language in Taiping documents, which referred to all men as *xiongdi* (brothers) and all women as *jiemei* (sisters) and declared that “we are all God’s children, created equal by God.” To elite families like the Zhang, this was a repulsive attack on values that lay at the core of their civilization. As one anti-Taiping tract put it: “They defy the orderly hierarchy of the cosmos, in complete ignorance of the proper relationship between elders and youth, between persons of honor and persons who are lowly” (*ni tian bei li buzhi zhangyou zunbei zhi xu*). Rallying local leaders to the war effort, Zeng Guofan called on “all those who can read” to heed and fight the teachings of the Taiping movement. His “Call to Purge the Guangdong Rebels” (“Tao Yuefei xi”) described with disgust the Taiping “perversion of normative moral relationships (*mingjiao zhi qibian*). “How,” he demanded, “can any educated person possibly fold his hands in his sleeves and do nothing?”¹⁵ Wang Caipin and other members of her family recorded their own visceral reactions to the Taiping movement, as the reader will later learn.

For obvious reasons, revulsion against the Taiping sparked a will to “restore,” not reform, imperial China’s values and institutions. Reacting to the empire’s obvious military weakness, underscored by the signing of two humiliating treaties with Western powers in 1842 and 1861, the Qing government launched a vigorous program for “self-strengthening,” led by men who

were closely associated with Wang Caipin's family. Self-strengthening, with its emphasis on shipyards, arsenals, translation bureaus, and restoring the agrarian economy, required no change in women's roles. If anything, the self-strengthening program made talented women like Wang Caipin even more valuable and important as widows and survivors who would rear and educate the next generation. Not until 1895, the crucial turning point in Xu Zhenyi's own consciousness of his country's plight, was self-strengthening acknowledged as a failure. Increasingly radical reforms, then revolution, followed within a decade. With them came a condemnation of the *guixiu* of Wang Caipin's generation, who were dismissed as frivolous and ignorant dependants upon men whose bound feet and fancy poetry were an embarrassment to an emerging nation.

The talented women of the Zhang family led lives that later reformers in China and elsewhere dismissed as benighted and backward. But hearing their stories now makes us ask: what was "new" about the "new woman" of the twentieth century?