FEMALE WRITING AND RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN QING DYNASTY

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Abstract: Religion, especially Buddhism and Taoism, greatly influenced female writing during the Qing Dynasty (1639-1912). The life experiences related to religion enabled writers to reflect over the hardships of life and the fantasy of breaking away from the world, with the hope of enlightenment. The language and style of female poets expressed religious thoughts and feelings, while the religious vocabulary and imageries of Buddhism and Taoism enriched the poetic language and images within their work. Based on the close relationship between religious culture and women's writing in the Qing Dynasty, this paper investigates women's literature and the influence of religious culture on women's lives.

Keywords: Buddhism and Taoism, escape from suffering, literary creation, religionization of literature, religious culture.

1. Introduction

Within female writings of Qing Dynasty, religion, especially Buddhism and Taoism, had great influence. They either believed in religion when they were young, or they practiced it under the influence of their families, or they turned to seek liberation in religious faith in the face of major changes. These life experiences related to religion coloured the language and style of female poets with relevant marks, which further influenced the appearance of female literary creation in Qing Dynasty and gave birth to another important realm of female literary creation.

2. Female Mentality in Qing Dynasty under the Influence of Religious Culture

For the women of Qing Dynasty, the narrow living environment and the limited contact with socio-political public life made their overall

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living conditions very closed and private. Even though some women could travel with the officials and meet together, they were still very limited compared to men who had more free public life. Such life experience made them, in the words of Wang,

... less independent than men in thought and behavior, so they are more likely to accept idolatry consciousness than men; and because their spiritual life is often more poor and monotonous than men, they need to enrich their spiritual world with religious belief, and constantly adjust their psychology. It's a way that people who can't grasp their own destiny and fear the future of life are accustomed to adopt (Wang, *Buddhism*, 212).

It is precisely in the process of frequent contact with religion that their mentality was influenced and stained in the hue of strong religious cultural colour. Therefore, in the works of the poetesses of Qing Dynasty, we read:

I (Wang Duan) got to know Tao a little later, so I did not practice it very well in early time. Then I had to insist on reciting it, and I read hundreds of *Yushu Scriptures*, expecting to understand Tao successfully (Wang, *Collection*, 20).

(Bao Kaizhen) burns and discards her pen, kneels down to the Buddha, and swears that she will never read in the rest of her life (Shi 455).

(Xu Can), only embroidered Buddhism in her studio, and didn't care about affairs outside. She was called as Gelaoting (Gu and Fu 20).

Some of these poetesses either placed themselves into religion or did not want to move away from it, some took advantage of religion to avoid the world, and some accepted religious faith and hoped to devote themselves to the Tao and stay away from karma. Under the influence of religious culture, the poetesses of Qing Dynasty expressed their endless life of lamentation and the hope of escaping from the problems of life in their works. The religious world seems to be a peaceful and carefree paradise in their hearts, which could provide the women who are suffering from hardships in their life with peace and quiet mind. In the Qing Dynasty, Chen Wenshu once said, "Most females who turn to religion are those who have no choice. They are forced by the life to do so" (Wang, *Poetry*, 2565).

Wu Zao, a distinguished female writer during the middle Qing Dynasty, married a businessman but did not have happy relations

with her husband. However, after the husband's death, she seemed to care more about him and look to him as her protector. Especially after the hardship she suffered in life, she decided to stop writing and devote herself to the Tao. It is said in her collection:

... in the past ten years, people have been worried for the rest of their lives. There are always things that people cannot predict. I'm afraid that I won't do more writings. So I collected my previous manuscripts that are fortunately saved, and named them with the name of my house. From now on, I will abandon writing and devote myself to Buddhism, and my soul will fly to the pure land of the south of Xiang Mountain and the north of Xue Mountain. When will I be successful?" (Wu, Xiangnan, 30)

Wu Zao believed that since the sufferings in world are endless, we should take advantage of the religious pure land to eliminate all our worries. Among them, the south of Xiangshan Mountain and the north of Xueshan Mountain is the place without sufferings. There is a saying in the Tripitaka: Mount Xumi is surrounded by seven golden mountains, and there is another Xiangzui mountain beyond the golden mountain, which is five hundred yojana (a length unit) high. In the south of Xiangshan Mountain, there is Ahanda pool, that is, the pool without heat and worry. To the south of the pool, there is a big snow mountain (Cheng 121). Therefore, the south of Xiang Mountain and the north of Xue Mountain become Wu Zao's fantasy of breaking away from the world, and it is also the basis for her to break away from the bitter life. Under the influence of religious feelings, Wu Zao's mentality has also changed from being active to being recluse. When we read her works, we can find that some of her early works suffer from an impossibility of realizing her own value.

In *Qiao Ying*, a famous drama, Xie Xucai disguises herself as a man, drinks and reads to express her resentment. She has ambitions but cannot realize it because of her gender! However, the replacement of gender is undoubtedly difficult. Wu Zao soon realized that even as a woman, she can become a hero just like a man. She wrote: "there is no difference for men and women to become a hero" (Wu, *Flower*, 4115); "hold cups in the East Pavilion and see the swords, and jointly ride a horse in the West Garden. Girls can also be heroes." (Wu, *Flower*, 4131). Wu Zao's early wish of participating in the politics was very strong. Even in front of the inherent division of gender roles, she fantasized about contributing

to her country and people. However, the pursuit of self-worth had changed after the setbacks in life and the approach to religion.

The religious emotions affecting Wu Zao were complex. She exhibited traits of influence from both Buddhism and Taoism. She realized that life was nothing but emptiness and bitterness, like Epiphyllum and bubble. Her religious conversion showed a new understanding of life that desired and longed for seclusion. This new emotional experience dispelled her positive psyche to enter the world. She began to redeem herself in the quiet and peace, and pursue the nature and innocence of the inner world in the void and illusion.

Under the influence of religious culture, the works of female poets in Qing Dynasty emote feelings of enlightenment. In the process of fighting against secular pain with religious feelings, these poetesses agree with some religious views, such as reincarnation, karma, and void; so there is a sense that life in the world is like a fallen flower and an empty dream. Xiong Lian, for example, a female poet during the middle Qing Dynasty, had a miserable life. Chen Zun, her fiancé, suffered from a mental illness. Chen's father asked her to leave her fiancé, but Xiong Lian still insisted on marrying Chen Zun. Her behaviour brought her the reputation of being a good person, but also imprisoned her in misfortune. She and her sick husband could not know and cherish each other's love. This marriage could not even give her a child to rely on for the rest of her life, which made her full of deep worries about her later life. In this kind of unremitting sorrow, she turned to religion. Some of Xiong Lian's works are the results of her thoughts growing out of collision with religious culture at the time of her poverty. For example,

Before, because of common love, I was constricted; now I spend a lot of time on burning incense to salute the heaven. There is no one to talk to in the world and only Buddha will pity me. I dreamed of my three lives, and the blue sea often had five colored flowers. I look back and find I do not go too far, and I will return to peace in the rest of life (Xiong, *Collection*, 3577). Being young and having black hair. With a basket, I have collected all kinds of Ganoderma lucidum. Prosperous dreams are good. Youth cannot be bought even by gold. I wake up from Handan Dream and see enough of leisure and vicissitudes of life. Suddenly I realize that it is a dream through the ages, and tears drop on the thousands of years of Huabiao. I float in the air. At ten thousand Ii up high, the crane is flying, the wind is clear, and the cloud clothing is light. The immortal road is far away and is easy to get lost. I feel a little afraid, so I sing loudly and blow the flute which makes Yanfu (a kind of tree) old. Returning from the walking, I find a smoking deep jade hole with peach blossom in the spring dawn (Xiong, *Qing*, 2351).

The works often portray prayers to Buddha or travels in the fairyland. They are all a reflection of Xiong Lian's acceptance of the cultural influence of religion (mainly Buddhism and Taoism). However, compared with those who are addicted to the religious atmosphere, Xiong Lian stayed sober in such contexts. Religion could only bring her a moment of peace and escape, which was not enough to bring her long-term spiritual sustenance. Once she left the world of thought and imagination, the real suffering was still in front of her. Therefore, in the case of being unable to escape and meeting all kinds of sufferings in reality, Xiong Lian seems to see through the love, hate, and hatred in the world of mortals, and has a calm attitude towards sadness and happiness. Xiong Lian always entertained herself by chanting. She was broad-minded and close to the purpose of immortals' interpretation, so there was much enlightenment in her poems (Xiong, Qing, 2351). It must have been realized by Xiong Lian from her personal life experiences about limitations of all things in the world: there is no eternal existence from ancient times to the present, no matter they are talented people, beautiful women or descendants, all of whom will turn into smoke in the future. In the vast smoke of the times, all the sufferings and joys are insignificant. This kind of awareness is born with religious culture as the trigger point. Xiong Lian wrote many times:

The first lover in a thousand years, assimilated, with plain creeper (Xiong, *Qing*, 2351).

I love myself when I was young, and youth vanishes like an illusory bubble (Xiong, *Qing*, 2351).

I think that Wu palace is just like a Nanke dream, where the happiness disappears in a second (Xiong, *Qing*, 2351).

Worry or joy, royal or youth are nothing but illusory bubble. Of course, such a change of mindset also includes the comfort and encouragement. From the poor to the rich, from the youth to the dead, everyone is like this. And her suffering is no exception. Therefore, through religion, Xiong Lian grounds herself back to reality. Even if she yearns for the blissful world without suffering, this yearning is not the footnote for not living seriously in the present world, but rather to live a good life.

Therefore, for the poetesses of Qing Dynasty, religion is not only a shelter from suffering, but also a tool for self-comfort and selfescape. With the help of religion, they were dispelling the great sorrow in the present life and gaining the power of spiritual life and maintaining the courage of life. Religious culture helped poetesses in Qing Dynasty to build a wall to protect themselves, even though the barrier was not so strong.

3. Religious Cultural Influence in Women Literature

Under the influence of religious culture, in addition to the changes in the mentality of women in the Qing Dynasty, there have been some changes in the works of women in the Qing Dynasty. Female poets used terms from Buddhist and Taoist discourses to enrich their poetic language and to increase the beauty of the images expressed in poetry. At the same time, the addition of religious factors makes the style of the work more diversified with strong Buddhist colour.

First of all, influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, women poets often use words that are frequently used in Buddhist and Taoist literature, such as "Fuoupaoying" (Foam on the water), "Jinxian" (Buddha), "Penglai" (a mythical mountain), "Kunlun" (Kunlun Mountains), "Magu" (a mythical fairy), and "Elvhua" (a mythical fairy). They sometimes use religious language to interpret classics, or to express their understanding. For example, Wang Duan says: "I haven't boarded the beautiful building and green water, and illness has increased. But I now know my nature and heart which makes me have long term vision and broad mind. I cross the sea of bitterness by the fairy boat, with the light of pearl and the Buddha candle. Taking about who will be my partner, God will manage my family" (Wang, Collection, 3953). Similarly, Wu Zao writes: "Seeing through all the floating retting and bubbles, the boundless margin is empty by insisting on half Ji. The precipice is over." (Wu, Xiangnan, 4154). Another example is: "I repent to the golden immortal in the still night. But it's strange that the lotus in the fire doesn't die. It's the best Zen and realizes that the void is broken. Giving up gives birth to stillness and stillness produces wisdom" (Wu, Xiangnan, 4155).

Almost every sentence of these works are about religion. They use a relatively dense religious vocabulary. If there is no relevant knowledge accumulation or background introduction, it will take a lot of time to read them.

There are also times when female poets use religious language such as haze, white cloud, feather, crane or Prajna, Dharma phase, Sanzhu,¹ etc. to create a religious horizon for the poem. As Wang Duan said, "the dragon's hidden nature in the sea, and the friary crane flies in the sky with the moon in the bottle" (Wang, *Collection*, 21). Xu Can said: "After dreams being broken, he eventually converts to Buddhism. Returning to youth, he doesn't envy immortals. It's easy to live in seclusion in the mountain forest with rafters and thatched houses beside the fountains" (Xu, *Zhuozheng*, 350). In these verses, they set their spiritual expectations in the religious world, and the well-known allusions and doctrines are now transformed into a paradise through these poetic expressions and imaginations.

It is precisely because of the influence of religious culture that when female poets try to settle their own troubles and sorrows, these hidden Buddhist and Taoist consciousness arise spontaneously in their writings through the Buddhist and Taoist vocabulary. Their imagination is no longer confined by the common women's familiar feelings of spring, flowers, autumn, and sorrow, but gallops in a new realm of immortality, which is free to fantasize and full of Buddhism. Therefore, the language of Buddhism and Taoism enriches the expression of female poets' works, fills them with their fantasies about the religious world, and gives them great consolation and courage to face difficulties. Women's works with religious vocabulary helped also making a ground-breaking approach.

Secondly, in terms of poetic style, the works of female poets influenced by religious culture show multiple stylistic features. Let us first look at the style of female poets' works under the influence of Buddhism. For example: "River and cloud is not near the tree, and there is no boat in Chunpu. Knowing the natural meaning, the flowers fly and the water flow" (Xu, *Collection*, 3225). Although this

¹The Tianzhu Peak in the southeast of The Flying Peak of Lingyin Mountain in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, has three monasteries: Upper Tianzhu, Middle Tianzhu and Lower Tianzhu, collectively known as 'Sanzhu' (Three Zhu) for short.

poem is simple, it is full of Zen motifs. It has a sense of integration of poetry and Zen and gives readers an endless reading experience. The combination of the author's spiritual interests and Buddhism is reflected in the poetic works of female poets. Of course, there are also some female writers who combine Buddhism with their own circumstances, making their works show a profound style. For example, Xu Can, a representative poetess in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty, shows two-times ups and three-times downs in her life along with her husband, Chen Zhilin. The miserable life because of her husband's exile to Ningguta, the death of her husband and son, forced her to hide in Buddhism and Zen to get rid of the sorrows. In her later years, Xu Can was able to return to her hometown. Wu Dun of the Qing Dynasty also depicted Xu Can's life in his two works:

She is depressed in Gelaoting and pray to Buddha for several years. She watches the bright moon in the south tower. It's more beautiful than girls in the twelve buildings (Wu, *Miscellaneous*, 100).

There is no reply to Yu Gong's roar and chant. The Green Lantern and ancient Buddha is her company. Sit and watch the moon whose light is like water. See through her previous life (Wu, *Moonlit*, 100).

Xu Can wrote *the Sutra of Vajra written in Hesu Temple*: Exploring Prajna every day, awakening the mind with dust. Gradually she understood the meaning of the Sutra and forget experiencing the autumn beyond the Great Wall (Xu *Zhuozheng*, 320).

In this poem, we can see that after her conversion to Buddhism she wanted to return home from the places beyond the Great Wall; her feelings have become more stable and calmer. The melancholy feelings expressed in her early poems did not exist any longer. All sorrow moods seem to have been dissolved by Buddhism, and the style of her poems has turned to profound connotation and longterm artistic conception, which is endless aftertaste.

In addition, under the influence of Taoism, the style of female writing is often gorgeous and romantic, with multiple images of immortals superimposed, presenting the readers with a colourful world of immortals. In fact, the influence of Taoism on female poets was very early in religious culture. There were many female Taoist poets in Tang Dynasty, such as Xue Tao. There are many

imaginations about Taoism in her poems. Wishing to enjoy the joy of the world, but also wishing to live an extraordinary life is the desire of the whole intellectuals who follow Taoism in Tang Dynasty. The cultural factors of Taoism not only influenced Xue Tao's poetic creation and made her language clear and elegant, allusions fresh and contained, imagination extraordinary and refined, but also helped Xue Tao to break through the double resistance of feudal society of class and gender on the road of classifying her poetry, and become the leading female poet in Tang Dynasty. There were still many women poets who believed in Taoism in the Qing Dynasty, and their works were colourful because of the ornament of the romantic Taoist world. For example, Wang Duan, a poetess in the Qing Dynasty, wrote in her *Emperor Ming of the Tang Dynasty and Luo Gongyuan Listen to the Nishang Song under the Moon*:

Thousands of miles of silver and five rainbows, this body really reaches Guanghan palace. The sound of the orchestral string is beyond the ice wheel, and the pavilion is in a crystal mirror. The feather cape is misty there, and the osmanthus is exquisite without trees. The purple clouds bend the rainbow spectrum, and the heavenly music floats all over the blue sky (Wang, *Collection*, 21).

This poem describes what the emperor Ming of the Tang Dynasty heard and saw in the Moon Palace under the guidance of the magician Luo Gongyuan. It depicts a fairyland scene with graceful music, exquisite osmanthus trees, and pavilions. The work is the result of the fusion of Wang Duan's personal talent and Taoism.

We cannot overemphasize the influence of religion on female literary creation. Most of them hope to use religion to achieve the role of self-justification and emotional relief, so religion is more like a good medicine for them. It is far from to say that they use religion to express the profound artistic conception, or to arouse the deep thinking of themselves and even their people on social life by religion. In the works of the poetess of Qing Dynasty, Buddhism and Taoism, as a way of spiritual cultivation and their connection with the ideal world, have been internalized into their cultural character and aesthetic realm, which are all organically integrated into their literary creation. It adds new writing content to the poetess and becomes an indispensable and even striking cultural factor in the female works of Qing Dynasty.

4. Conclusion

Under the large-scale collision and fusion of local culture and foreign culture, Buddhism and Taoism have been widely and persistently spread in China. These religious factors combined with intellectuals' cultivated feelings exert a profound influence on Chinese literature and culture. For example, Buddhism influenced the rhythm of ancient Chinese poetry; Zen philosophy the artistic conception of poetry; and Taoism the poetic romantic imagination. In terms of feminine writing in Qing Dynasty, the spread and popularity of religious culture enriches the themes and contents of feminine writing, expands the artistic conception of poetry, and enriches the criticism of women's literary theory objectively.

First, religious culture enriches the language and content of feminine writing in the Qing Dynasty. Religion not only provides female poets with the consolation of escaping from the world, but also exerts a subtle influence on women's literary creation through the manifestation of religious doctrines and the way of thinking. In terms of language expression, female poets in the Qing Dynasty enriched their works with relevant religious doctrines and cultural connotations, through interpreting the terms of Buddhism and Taoism, reciting with great concentration to expressing contrition. In terms of content expression, these religious and cultural factors, as poets' reflections on social life, have often been internalized into their unique spiritual cultivation and cultural character, adding new content and realm to their works. Wu Zao said in her early work, "... Lonely Lin Palace ... Incense fire cause, buddhist language, to sing and join in the clouds, a sweet smile, Jade plum spring" (Wu, Flower, 4118). The Buddhist language and allusions mentioned in the poem are organically integrated into the literary creation, presenting a picture of Zen like listening to the rain in the empty mountain.

Secondly, religious culture expanded the theme and artistic conception of feminine writing in Qing Dynasty. In particular, Zen thought and Taoist immortal world enriched the theme and artistic conception of poetry and made feminine writing in the Qing Dynasty more colourful. Wu Zao wrote her poem in order to seek inner peace in her meditation on Buddhist principles, "a sad tear, inditing scratch, old red shirt, wash more red back, break off the setting sun fragrant grass, twinkling of an eye flowing clouds, silent night to the golden fairy confession, but blame the lotus in the fire"

Wu, Xiangnan, 4155). According to Zhang Zhongxing's introduction to the Collection of Translated Names, "preciseness, determination and wisdom" in Wu Zao's poem can be interpreted as: "To prevent and stop bad days, to rest and meditate, to break bad days, to prove true wisdom" (Zhang 41). "Precepting wisdom," collectively known as the three Schools, is a method of Buddhist practice. In addition to "preciseness, determination and wisdom," "fire lotus," "superior Zen," "enlightenment" and other Buddhist terms and Buddhist allusions are also included in the poems. The female poet's helpless choice of life is shown in the rich Buddhist philosophy. Buddhist culture has a profound influence on Wu Zao and her works, which has become an important content and feature of her works. As far as the artistic conception of poetry is concerned, Buddhism holds that everything is empty, self-transcendence, and there is no state outside the mind. It holds that the ultimate truth of the universe is "empty," and meditation is the path to the truth. Religious culture inherits the delicate artistic realm of female literature, pursues an empty and quiet state of mind, and develops an unprecedented artistic conception of transcendent and complacent, quiet and fresh, poetry.

Another example is Wang Duan's poem, "Mu Tianzi held a banquet at Yao Pool to leave the Queen mother" under the influence of Taoism culture. This poem depicts the scene of Mu Tianzi and the Queen mother feasting on the Yao Pool (Wang, *Collection*, 19b). In this poem, Wang Duan constructs an immortal world for us. Mu Tianzi and the Queen mother were enjoying the immortal dew beside the fragrant Yao pool. In the poem, immortals, fairyland, and the celestial world are all auspicious. Such works are not rare in Wang Duan's poems, which show the profound influence of Taoism culture on Wang Duan and the exploration of religious culture on the theme of feminine writing in the Qing Dynasty. In terms of artistic conception, these poems often have strange imagination, magnificent language, and bouncing and overlapping images, showing us colourful and romantic fairy paintings.

Thirdly, religious culture, especially Buddhism, enriched the construction of feminine literature theories in Qing Dynasty. The theories of mind, form and spirit, speech and meaning, state and enlightenment in Buddhist culture have an important enlightening effect on the development of Chinese literary theories. Since the Tang Dynasty, there have been theoretical critics who combined Buddhist

doctrine with poetry and prose evaluation to form a unique theory of literary criticism. For example, "Si-Wai Theory" by Si Kongtu in the late Tang Dynasty and "Analyzing Poetics Metaphorically with Zen" by Yan-Yu in the Southern Song Dynasty were both obviously influenced by the Zen Buddhist perspectives. During the Qing Dynasty, some poetry theorists had close relations with Buddhism and were proficient in Zen philosophy. Therefore, they could make contributions in the field of criticism by evaluating poems with Buddhist theories and their own views and unique interpretations. For example, Tan Xian used "Zen of Words" to comment on Li E's "A Poem of Autumn Songs". Under such background, female literary criticism in the Qing Dynasty also pursued artistic conception and implied meaning and tried to express the inner spirit through plain and simple language, so as to remove the mannerism in the works. For example, Xi Peilan's "Titus Wan Xian" expresses her ideal goal:

A burin cutting clouds excellent chapter, pearl wear on the line. Sweep brow pencil without powder, blurt out when Buddha incense. As expected, wisdom and water, talent only live in Jixiang. The cold window takes the black silk this, it is good when the plum flower savor" (Xi 7a).

She was clearly aware that if women only indulged in the spring and autumn rain in the boudoir, only satisfied with their own delicate and gentle description, but could never write heroic and vigorous poems. Feminine poetry creation would always be trapped in the limited space of "women's poetry" and would never be truly recognized by the literary world. Or in other words, she hoped that the style of feminine poetry would be much richer and more acceptable by the literary world, so as to objectively improve the literary status of women.

Of course, there is no denying that religious culture also had a negative impact on feminine writing. For example, the "Doctrine of the Beginning of Truth," which had a great influence on the Qing dynasty, pointed out that there were ten evils in the world, namely, "greed, anger, delusion, adultery, murder, theft, evil mouth, loose speech, two tongues, and false words." If one commits one of the ten evils, "they would disturb the body and mind and cause the six roots to act rashly, willingly suffer and wander, and die forever" (Ren 569). Among them "loose speech" also refers to the boudoir, sex, and other gorgeous rhetoric and all profane language. The ten good commandments are listed as one of the four oral occupations. As Yu Yan of the Ming Dynasty said in his book, "Buddha has ten commandments, and his mouth is the fourth, where loose speech and false words are included." (Yu, 403) Under the influence of this background, the pious female poet thinks that her fate is bleak and her life is difficult because she has broken the commandment of loose speech, and that is why there is the elimination of the text, repentance of loose speech. As mentioned above, Wang Duan, whose husband died at an early age, devoted herself to chanting sutras and even burned down her novel History of the Yuan and Ming Dynasties in order to "restore the original destiny." As Wu Zao also wrote: "After ten years of hardship for the rest of my life, personnel have no words. High-brow music, and then the thing was broken, after fear no more." (Wu, Xiangnan, 4138). It was a clear evidence of the influence of religious culture on feminine creation.

To sum up, the spread of religious culture, especially the Buddhism and Taoism in China, not only enables women to rebuild their spiritual home, but also alleviates their difficulties in real life. Moreover, it enriched the content and language of feminine writing in the Qing Dynasty, expanded the theme and artistic conception of poetry, brought more abundant image groups and exotic romantic imagination to feminine writing, and even affected the construction of feminine literary theory criticism. By gradually blending with religious culture, feminine writing in the Qing Dynasty made religious poetry an important part of feminine writing in the Qing Dynasty, indicating the arduous efforts made by feminine literature in the course of diversified development.

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