

# The Image of Canton Women in a Westerner's Eyes in the Late Qing Dynasty: Take Fourteen Months in Canton as a Case Study

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**Abstract.** The image of women in the late Qing Dynasty has always been enigmatic due to the custom in Canton that virtuous women rarely left their chambers. The book *Fourteen Months in Canton*, however, contains Mrs. Gray's insights during her residence in Canton, including her extensive records of both upper-class and ordinary women in Canton at the time. Her accounts are valuable historical sources for the study of women in Canton in the late Qing Dynasty. At present, there are few academic studies on the topic of women in Canton in the late Qing Dynasty and the works by Mrs. Gray. Through a textual analysis of Mrs. Gray's *Fourteen Months in Canton*, and supported by relevant historical sources from the same period, the paper aims to collate and analyse the images of upper-class and ordinary women in Canton, and thus explores the daily life, survival, and inner world of women in Canton in the late Qing Dynasty.

**Keywords:** Canton, Women, *Fourteen Months in Canton*, Everyday Life.

## 1. Introduction

It had always been the custom in traditional Canton that 'women of good morals do not go out of their pavilions, and their sisters-in-law and uncles do not see them unless it is a festival', so the lives of women in Canton were always mysterious. In the late nineteenth century, Canton was one of the most important ports of commerce for foreigners, and there was a rise in the number of 'buyers who served the foreign trade. To entertain foreign guests and satisfy their curiosity, some of the buyers allowed visiting foreigners to have contact with their families and even enter their back houses, this opened a window into the life of women in Canton. During her travels, Mrs. Gray was able to meet some of the ladies of the merchants and officials, and meticulously observed the daily life of ordinary women.

Mrs. Gray, originally Julia Cox (1838-1921), born in Brighton, England, married John Henry Gray who was the chaplain to the British Consulate in Canton, in 1876. Then they left from Liverpool, England, with her husband on 13 January 1877, stopping in the United States and Japan before arriving in Hong Kong. On about 23 March 1878, they left for Canton, where they were living for fourteen months in the following days. Her husband had already had a good knowledge of this city, and he guided Mrs. Gray through the sights of Canton, as well as its streets and ceremonies. During this time, she wrote to her mother and friends in England about what she had seen and heard in the city, including food, clothing, festivals, customs, and beliefs, etc. Unfortunately, she stopped her journey on 8 June 1878 because she became severely ill. After her return to England, she collected her forty-four letters from this period into a book entitled *Fourteen Months in Canton*, with a preface, and was published by Macmillan & Co. in London in 1880. In her book, she describes in detail the daily life in 19th-century Canton from a unique female perspective and draws a vivid picture of women's lives in the city.

The image of Canton women and the use of the book *Fourteen Months in Canton* are currently less used in academic circles. This paper focuses on research through text analysis, collating the images of upper-class and ordinary women in the book *Fourteen Months in Canton* and then discussing the daily life, survival and inner world of Canton women in the late Qing Dynasty.

## 2. The appearance and daily life of upper-class women

The women of the upper classes consisted mainly of female family members of wealthy merchants, officials, and gentry, and Mrs. Gray's knowledge of these upper-class women came mainly from the families of Wu Haoguan and from attending top-class parties. According to Mrs. Gray's observations they usually wore coats, tight skirts, and fat trousers underneath, embroidered shoes that were decorated with gold, silver, jade, and flowers. Even during the mourning period, they were dressed delicately, only changing to the blue colour that indicated they were in mourning, 'The ladies wore beautifully embroidered robes; the underskirt was in dark blue silk, with raised embroidery of shaded light blue flowers. The skirt sits extremely close, and is in fact very narrow. The trousers were made in plain dark blue silk. The ladies on arriving apologised that they had not on their best red costumes, saying that they could not wear them on account of their mourning' The young lady's costume was equally gorgeous, 'All had exceedingly small, bound feet. They were all richly dressed in bright colours and elegant; ornaments. Bounding feet was one of the characteristics of upper-class women, which was considered a sign of cultivation, but there were exceptions. For example, Wu Haoguan's wife kept her natural feet.

In addition, their diet was quite generous. Wu once invited Mr. and Mrs. Gray to attend his family banquet. During this visit, Mrs. Gray enjoyed a private lunch and dinner with the ladies of the Wu family, the food on the table included soup, snacks, duck with soy sauce and mustard, seaweed and fried cicada pupae with chillies, etc. This would not have been available to an ordinary family at that time.

Despite enjoying privileged material life, these women had low social status. During her visit to the procession in honour of Paak-taai, Mrs. Gray and her husband were invited to have a cup of tea by the shop owner and she accounted that 'On such occasions I sit quietly by and can observe all so well from the fact (humiliating as it may be) that no one notices me, all the attention being paid to my husband. He has argued several times with Chinese gentlemen on the subject of equality between men and women and has pointed out to them their duty of giving women their proper position. One with whom he was conversing on the subject did not attempt to argue the point, but observed quietly in conclusion, "Man is as the sun, woman as the moon".' Obviously, women were subordinate in gender relations and unimportant in public.

This subordinate position left the upper-class women with very limited space to move around in a daily life and regular outings were not permitted, because 'A father would not like to be seen with his daughter in the streets, nor a husband with his wife'. Their daily activities were confined to the house, 'A Chinese lady spends her time on embroidering shoes and other work, playing cards and dominoes, hanging out in the garden, gossiping with her female friends and amahs, and smoking occasionally'. In the daily lives of these women, the most inseparable person is 'amahs', and their tenderness was clearly presented in the relationship. On the second visit to the Wu's banquet, Mrs. Gray had this observation 'We now sat down to dinner, the amahs taking up their places behind their respective mistresses, upon whom they waited as if they were little children. They become very confidential companions of the ladies, and are treated well as a rule by them; in fact, these ladies seemed to cling to their amahs as English children cling to their nurses, asking them for advices and opinions, on all matters'. In addition, when the ladies dining, amahs were crumbled and peeled foods with their hands and fed this to their mistresses. When ladies went out, they were carried on amahs' backs.

In this way, the image of the upper-class woman is one of elegance and softness, a well-groomed and disciplined work of art, who dresses and behaves in accordance with propriety. But in fact, this is only how they behave in public, in private they have a distinctly different face. Mrs. Grey did not observe the pattern of the wife and concubines' dealings with each other, but there is a detailed description of the disorder in the upper-class family in the notes of Yvan the Frenchman. Yvan was invited to the house of Pan Shicheng, a wealthy merchant from the thirteenth estate, whose wife, Madame Li, was from an upper-class family in the capital, but it was this 'elegant' lady who slapped a concubine directly in the face for being too slow in delivering her goods. During Yvan's conversation with Pan, more secrets were revealed about the upper-class family, he believes that 'a

multiplicity of wives involved the certainty that the husband would be deceived frequently, and with impunity; these ladies draw up the ladder of their own love secrets after them!' Most wives cheated on their husbands and some sons seduced concubines who were belonging to their fathers was a common occurrence.

In particular, the inner world of these upper-class women was lonely and isolated. The American Consul's wife told Mrs. Gray the story of the wife of Liu Kunyi, then the present viceroy of Cantone was the apple of his eye and he had told the American Consul several times how significant his wife was to his daily life. This lady felt unbearably lonely on arrival in Canton because she was separated from her family. However, the court had stipulated that the governor's wife's family could not accompany her. In the end, she swallowed opium and killed herself in March 1877. In fact, this phenomenon is not only found in Guangzhou, as E. A. Rose writes in his book that 'the opium harvest season often becomes a time of suicide for young women'. It is apparent that the spiritual world of these upper-class women is far less convivial than they appear to be when they treat others, and that they are lonely on the inside, leaving aside their public elegance and enthusiasm.

### 3. The appearance and daily life of ordinary women

In addition to the maids mentioned above, the ordinary women observed by Lady Grey included labourers, ship women, golems, etc. The dress of these ordinary females falls into two categories. One is plainer and simpler, 'The ordinary woman's dress strikes me as very inelegant; it is composed of a wide blue or prune-coloured cotton blouse edged with black, and very wide blue or prune-coloured cotton trousers. Sometimes the dress, etc., are made in dark-brown cotton'. In addition, women who live on boats all year round always do not wear shoes and socks. This is because most of these women were employed to make a living from the labour, and simple clothing made it easier to work. For example, boat women were employed to carry passengers; women workers collected tobacco stalks on tobacco farms and were employed to pick tea leaves in tea plantations.

The other group of females had splendid dresses and beauty, which were similar to the upper classes, and this was dependent on their livelihood. A typical example is the Gu Ji. Gu Ji were blind girls who sang for a living, usually led by an old woman who played a rattle and went from street to street. The inhabitants were their customers, sometimes the shopkeepers needed the little girls' songs to relieve their fellows, and the officials and merchants needed their performances as entertainment at their parties. It is worth noting that most of these blind girls took it upon themselves by medicine for this job.

The status of these ordinary women remained low. Mrs. Gray's friend, the American Consul's wife, had witnessed a sale of human beings outside her window, 'A crowd of women gathered round this man, the shawl was undone, and the poor baby girls were passed round from one woman to another to be examined. Then the bargaining began; the highest bidder offered five cents for one of the little creatures, but the man demanded six cents, and refused to sell either of the infants under this price', and enjoyed a black cat's eye in a street restaurant cost only 3 cents at the time. In general, baby abandonment and drowning are also common. The nurseries were full of abandoned girls, most of whom ended up as child brides or prostitutes.

Although materially less well off than the upper classes, the range of activity spaces of ordinary women expanded and they could go out without men or attendants. However, in general, they were still restricted, and apart from their homes, places of work, religious occasions, and shops, they hardly ever went out to other places such as teahouses, official ceremonies, and imperial examinations.

According to Mrs. Gray's observations, the religion of the women of the upper and lower classes converged, and they generally believed in these eight gods: Sanniang, the Lady Golden Flower, the Medicine King, Ksitigarbha, the Goddess's seven daughter, the City God, the Dragon Mother, and the Zhenwudadi. Of these gods and goddesses, the women usually go to worship the last five on specific days. On the birthdays of the Medicine King and the City God, women would visit their temples to worship and beg for their families to stay healthy or for the sick to be cured. On the 14th

day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, also known as the Midwinter Festival, women visit the Jizo Nunnery where they pay respects to their deceased relatives at the altar of the Bodhisattva Jizo. The women usually mourn and wail loudly, but according to the observation from Mrs. Gray 'I saw few tears, and I felt that a good deal of the noisy demonstration of grief was not real, but rather an acted part'. On the birthday of the Dragon Mother, women would go to the temple to beg for their daughters, wishing they could have a great marriage. The birthday of the Goddess's seven daughter, also known as the 7th day of the 7th month of the lunar calendar, is the time when women make offerings of embroidery to sacrifice the Seven Fairy Goddesses, begging for the gift of needlework. While the followers of the several gods mentioned above are predominantly women, Zhenwudadi is the belief of each resident in the city of Canton.

The most common worshippers of women are the Three Maidens and the Lady Golden Floweres, and the belief in these two deities is the most significant reflection of women's daily lives. The Sanniang Temple is located in the third hall of the Zao Sheng Da Wang Temple on the side of the square in front of the mountain gate of the Hua Lin Temple in Canton and is dedicated to the three goddesses of the Seven Stars. Their followers are mainly disgruntled women, and devotees would place male or female paper figures upside down on the altar. 'In such positions, they are placed either by female servants, or female slaves, who have unkind mistresses, or by women, who have quarrelsome female neighbours, or by the wives of polygamists who, through feelings of jealousy, not infrequently quarrel with each other'. The believer begs that with the help of the Goddess the wicked hearts of these people can be transformed into friendship and kindness.

Most of the devotees who place the male figures are concubines whose husbands have abandoned them or prostitutes who have been alienated by their patrons. They hope to use the power of the goddess to revive the hearts of these men. Another goddess, the Lady Golden Flower, is the protector of women and children. Most of the women beg the Lady Golden Flower to get them pregnant (preferably a boy) so that their husbands do not fall in love with someone else, or come with their children to ask for her blessing. The temple is attended by both male and female worshippers, but the majority are women. People usually bring generous tributes and the women enter the high platform in the main hall to worship, while the men worship under the high platform or at the altar on the side of the main gate. Ordinary women are the most common among the worshippers of the gods, while upper-class women usually come at a very early hour to avoid being witnessed. Both of them are devotees who show their respect for the gods by dressing neatly and flamboyantly, except when worshipping Jizo Bodhisattva.

In general, the women's converging beliefs reflect a common theme in their lives – the health of family members, good marital and interpersonal relationships – although there was a huge difference in material life between upper-class women and ordinary women.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The upper-class women of Canton possess two different images. In public, they are elegant and artificial works. They are elegantly dressed, graceful, and materially well off; they are warm and welcoming, and usually try their best to make their guests feel at home. At the same time, their daily activities are confined to the house, with only a few things to occupy their time. And they are weak and unable to care for themselves, relying heavily on the services of their close family. Considering their subordinate position to men, this image is more in line with male aesthetics than with their own. On the other hand, the other side of them in private is lonely and chaotic. Their relationships and entertainment are very simple due to their restricted daily lives, which contributes to their lonely, depressed inner world and the chaotic backstabbing of virtue that abounds for women in the back room. The material life and outward appearance of ordinary women were less refined than that of upper-class women, who were simply dressed and had to work to support their families. They are also less constrained and therefore have a more unified image inside and out.

However, it is notified that the women of Canton are not a fragmented group, as evidenced by their converging religious beliefs. The themes of concern in the lives of these women revolve around the health of their family members, good marital relations, and interpersonal relationships.

There is a wide gap between the material life and daily life of upper-class women and ordinary women, but the group is not fractured. They are all in a subordinate position to men, and they all have two different faces: on the surface they are decent and moral models, in private they are depressed and against morality. Further on, the local rule of the Qing dynasty relied heavily on morality and indoctrination, with a particular emphasis on modesty in relation to women. This huge difference between women in Canton, both inside and outside, is perhaps a symptom of the central government's declining control over the area, and a reflection of the decline of the dynasty in the late Qing.

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