

TEACHING ABOUT ASIA

Incorporating Women Into the Chinese History Survey—

Cooking The Five Grains and Heating the Wine: Guiding The Undergraduate Gaze

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To begin I would like to thank Chia Ning for all her work organizing this panel and giving us all this opportunity to think about different ways of approaching what is probably our most public task, teaching. In that spirit, I would like to talk about incorporating the teaching of women into our Chinese History survey courses. I take it as my task to offer some concrete ways in which this incorporation might be achieved.

As we look to bring materials on the situation, role, and status of women throughout Chinese history, into our courses via both lectures and readings of texts (including all types of texts), we are faced with a number of obstacles, three of which seem to stand out in particular. First, the basic general narrative that is usually covered in survey courses is already too expansive for one semester. This means that adding something necessitates cutting something. Although it is certainly not a zero-sum game in all cases, time, both in and out of class is limited. The second obstacle is the nature of the survey course itself. A degree of brevity and lack of depth is not only necessary, but rather justified in that the course is just that, a survey of Chinese history. Given the nature of survey courses, exploration of the variation in situation/role/status of women over time and space is very difficult in the allotted time. The third obstacle that must be faced when incorporating materials on women into our Chinese history survey courses is stereotypes. Perhaps stereotypes and generalizations would be the best way of describing this obstacle. While this is an obstacle with any course

we teach on a subject only vaguely familiar to our student body, I feel it is a particular problem when approaching the subject of women in Chinese history as it is a subject to which our students already seem to come with a certain amount of

baggage. It does not take much searching among mass media and popular culture to see the frustratingly familiar, stereotypical portrayal of Chinese (indeed Asian women in

general) women as submissive and obedient while lacking any sort of agency.¹ For instance if you just teach Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* and the *Mother of Mencius* story, the stereotypes of a number of our students will be reaffirmed. They won't be either challenged or refined.

In addition to these three obstacles, also crucial in helping our students gain a deeper and better understanding of Chinese history are the five sets of polarities pointed out by Joseph Adler.² These polarities include *textual traditions* and *social practices, normative texts* and *descriptive texts*, practices of the literate *elite* and those of the majority *commoners*, women constructed as *ideal symbols* and women seen as *diverse individuals*, and women portrayed as

objects of a male-centered "gaze" and women as *subjects* expressing their own lives and worldviews (all emphasis is Adler's).²

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courses. The first is to discredit and disallow sweeping generalizations about Chinese women on the whole, while emphasizing their changing roles and status across time and place. In particular I try to focus on agency; what types they exercised, where it could be practiced, its limits, etc. My other goal is to illustrate how the political, social and economic changes within Chinese society directly affected women. This goal fits in quite easily with the rest of the course.

Once the decision to incorporate women into your teaching of Chinese history survey courses has been made, there is no shortage of materials for you to turn to for both background information and research, as well as texts for students. In her recent state-of-the-field survey on women in China's "long twentieth century," Gail Hershatter notes approximately 500 works, mostly from the last two decades.³ That should put to rest any notion that there is not the background scholarship to support your

teaching efforts. There is, as well, a plethora of materials to help teach about women in China. However, I have found that my needs—and the financial concerns of students over book costs—can be met well enough by just two sources; Patricia Ebrey's *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, and Susan Mann and Yu-Yin Cheng's *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*.⁴ These give me plenty of breadth in choice for materials for my survey courses.⁵

In making suggestions for incorporating women into the general narrative of Chinese history survey courses, I am working off of two assumptions. First, although I recognize that the survey can be taught effectively with a topical approach (and women can be one topic), I am here assuming that the general outline of the course would be chronologically-based; second I am assuming that it is a semester long course. My purpose here is not to convince you that you should include such narratives in your courses, but rather to suggest ways and resources to undertake just such an incorporation. It should also be noted, by way of a final caveat, that the following suggestions are not the only way of incorporating the topic into your courses. What follows are just some examples and suggestions to help get started.

Typically I introduce the topic of women into my courses early on while addressing China's early schools of thought. I find that reading the story of the mother of Mencius can be used to begin to teach them to look for areas of agency that Chinese women may be able to carve out. The students seem to enjoy being introduced to a single, working mom from ancient China. I also include

the selections from Ban Zhao in the Ebrey sourcebook. I have also just added a text which places the *Book of Filial Piety* and the *Book of Filial Piety for Women* side by side.⁶ These texts all allow me to accomplish the dual task of introducing my students to Confucianism and women in Chinese society. I might note that it also allows me to bring up the differences between admonitory texts (normative texts under Adler's sets of polarities mentioned above) and descriptive texts which will be introduced later on in the course.

The next point I often use to incorporate women into my course's narrative is with the entry of Buddhism into China. This leads easily into a discussion of Empress Wu (r. 690-705) during the Tang. The story of Yang Guifei allows an opportunity for a discussion of numerous topics, including ideals of beauty, love and also concubinage.

With the Song we start to see an ever-widening range of both background research and available resources. Foot binding is a topic that must be addressed if women are going to be incorporated into your survey and there is a plethora of material to choose from (Dorothy Ko's

work⁷ is a good place to start). While the discussions that arise from the subject of footbinding are often very animated, I find that students also benefit tremendously from a set of readings contained in the Ebrey sourcebook under the provocative title "Women and the Problems They Create." These stories provide fascinating examples of what women could and could not do in Song society. They help the students come to a more layered understanding of Chinese society during the Song specifically, but also in general. Issues such as divorce and property rights, as

well as Song perceptions of the relative roles of women and men in their relations come to the fore in these readings.

Having dealt with the issue of footbinding in the Song, the Ming and the Qing offer the opportunity to confront the "cult of widow/female chastity." Once again the Ebrey sourcebook offers some readings which open the topic up. Also in the Ebrey sourcebook are some readings on the institution of concubinage, including an excerpt from the *Jin Ping Mei*. There is, however, an enormous amount of other material that could be brought in to the classroom depending on what you want to get across to the students. A piece that I have used successfully over the semesters is a translation of Yang Jisheng's "Final Instructions" by Beverly Bossler.⁸ As Bossler notes in the introduction to the translation, the colloquial style of writing is striking and allows the students to feel quite comfortable commenting about and discussing the piece. The piece itself, written while Yang was in prison awaiting sentencing (he had written a memorial charging a high official of corruption), provides a touching view of how a family works while displaying caring and emotion as Yang instructs his wife and sons on how to proceed should he be executed (which he was). In addition to these suggestions, selections from *Journey to the West*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Jin Ping Mei*, and *The Water Margin* abound and can be used depending on just what you want to focus on.

With the Qing Dynasty, as with the Song and the Ming, the problem is not finding material, but rather finding the material that best fits your course goals. I often use another text which focuses on the family, but is written by the matriarch, to follow up the "Final Instructions" of Yang Jisheng (discussed above). The text, "Letter to My Sons," was written by a woman named Gu Roupu (1592-ca. 1681) and is translated by Dorothy Ko. Gu is a fascinating woman and her story usually prompts at least one of my female students each semester to write a paper on the lives of female gentry. Gu was a gentry daughter from the Hangzhou region. Her husband died early so her father-in-law gave her a classical education so that she could train her sons.



11th Century Poet Li Qingzhao

She ended up not only training her sons, but other women as well. Her niece founded the female poetry club “the Banana Grove Five.” In 1632, Gu wrote a letter to her two sons indicating her decision to divide the household. The letter, as Dorothy Ko tells us, is “a rare example of a woman’s candid reflections on her multiple roles in the Confucian family.”⁹ Moving away from the topic of women within families, discussion of the Empress Dowager Cixi serves to help refer to and refresh material discussed previously in the course, as Empress Wu reenters the discussion.

The most interesting conversations occur when the class reads a play by a female Qing writer, Wu Zao. Sophie Volpp has translated Wu’s *Drinking Wine and Reading “Encountering Sorrow”: A Reflection in Disguise*, for the *Under Confucian Eyes* collection of translations.¹⁰ This text is useful first of all because it is a play, usually the only one we will read in class. Second, the play is a reflection on the limits of gender. Wu Zao’s character, a female poet, imagines herself a male (at least as a female cross-dressed as a male), so that her talents may be recognized. Because this text is read towards the end of the semester, the students, by this point, have enough background and raw material to deepen their discussion of gender as opposed to merely

“women” and what women did in China. This topic is unavoidable as the students must also confront the Qu Yuan poem “Encountering Sorrow” referred to in the title. In the poem Qu Yuan, uses the metaphor of an abandoned woman to expose the plight of an



Liu Shi, the Lady East-of-The-River, who dressed as a man in order to gain acceptance for her poetry. She was famous as both poet and visual artist. Photo by Sadie Jo Smokey

exiled courtier.¹¹ The play forces the students to work out perceptions of gender roles and to re-examine the stories, letters, and admonitory texts read throughout the semester.

In this brief paper I have attempted to provide some suggestions, by way of example, for incorporating more materials on and by women into a survey course on Chinese History. The paper was intended to begin a discussion by panel participants and attendees that would bring to light other resources and approaches to the benefit of all. One suggestion that came out of the discussion was to bring the concepts of gender and gender perceptions out earlier in the course. Some attendees felt that footbinding provided a good opportunity to address differences between conceptions of gender in the West and China. Others felt that the new research by Hostetler¹² and Emma Tang¹³ on

gendering the “Other” could also be used fruitfully in survey courses. These are good suggestions and certainly provide helpful examples of how we can bring current research into our classrooms, which is, after all, just what we should be striving to do.

Endnotes

¹ This paper does not directly address the subject of western, gendered perceptions of Asians, male or female, in general, though the theories and research on this subject are certainly related to the project as a whole.

² Joseph Adler, “Daughter/Wife/Mother or Sage/Immortal/Bodhisattva? Women in the Teaching of Chinese Religion.” Presented at the ASIANetwork Annual Meeting, Whittier, CA 2005.

³ Hershatter, Gail. “State of the Field: Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63.4 (2004):991-1065.

⁴ Full citations: Ebrey, Patricia. *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*. 2nd ed. New York: The Free Press, 1993. Mann, Susan, and Yu-Yin Cheng. *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

⁵ As a textbook I use Conrad Schirokauer’s *Brief History of Chinese Civilization*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1991.

⁶ Ebrey, Patricia. “The Book of Filial Piety for Women Attributed to a Woman Nee Zheng (ca. 730).” *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*. Ed. Susan Mann and Yu-Yin Cheng. 47-69.

⁷ Ko, Dorothy. *Every Step a Lotus: Shoes for Bound Feet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

⁸ Yang Jisheng. “Final Instructions.” Trans., with introduction, Beverly Bossler in Mann and Cheng, eds. *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*. 119-132

⁹ See Mann and Cheng, eds, *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*. 150.

¹⁰ Volpp, Sophia. “Drinking Wine and Reading “Encountering Sorrow”: A Reflection in Disguise by Wu Zao (1799-1862).” Mann, S. and Yu-Yin Cheng, Eds. 239-250.

¹¹ Volpp’s well-written introductory essay (p. 239-43) explains all of this to the reader, so that the students are able to see these issues as they read the translation.

¹² Hostetler, Laura. *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

¹³ Tang, Emma. *Taiwan’s Imagined Geography: Chinese Colonial Travel Writing and Pictures 1683-1895*. Harvard University Press, 2004.