Incorporating Women Into the Chinese History Survey—

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

Stephen Udry  
Carthage College  
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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 women (indeed Asian women in general) as submissive and obedient while lacking any sort of agency. 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. 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).

I have two goals when incorporating narratives of Chinese women into survey 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 had, 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.

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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. 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. These give me plenty
of breadth in choice for materials for my
survey courses.3

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
overwidenning 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
work 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.
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.” 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. 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 exiled courtier. 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 Hostetler and Emma Tang 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.


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.
