
The Heroines of Jiangyong is the first English-language translation of narrative ballads in women's script or nüshu 女書. Nüshu, a system for writing the dialect of Jiangyong, a county in southernmost Hunan, was used by women there to write letters, poems, ballads, complaints and tales. The script was restricted to a few villages and was not secret since some ballads or letters were sung or displayed publicly. For instance, brides sang laments at their weddings and were in turn presented with bridal nüshu (Third-Day Letters or sanzhaoshu 三朝書). The majority of the five hundred preserved manuscripts date from the 1980s when the few women who could read and write nüshu were asked to record what they knew from memory. Many manuscripts had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), while others were burnt or buried as funeral goods. Nüshu is remarkable because it provides a window into the lives of its users — rural peasant women, who rarely wrote about their experiences. These nüshu texts also stand in stark contrast to the bulk of women's writing by elite women of the largely urban Jiangnan region.

Idema's book provides translations of four versified moral tracts and eight narrative ballads or changben (唱本, literally “songbook”), a form which combined prose and verse. Read by the literate and recited to the illiterate, narrative ballad was a popular genre throughout China from the fourteenth century. Most are in seven-syllabic lines and rendered in formulaic language. They feature female virtues like chastity, fidelity, filiality, and female obedience, and convey the sufferings of daughters, daughters-in-law, and widowed mothers. As he argues, all of these texts together “offer a coherent picture of a demanding code of values that called for a life of thrift and diligence and for perseverance in the face of pain and disappointment” (p.23).

Part One consists of four moral tracts, beginning with the “Admonitions for my Daughter” (Xunnü ci 訓女詞), originally composed by a local gentry woman, Pu Bixian (1804-1860) to instruct her daughter on diligence. The “Ten Months of Pregnancy” (Shiyue huaitai 十月懷胎) details different stages of pregnancy and childrearing. The “Family Heirloom” (Chuanjia bao 傳家寶) covers materials similar to the former and also the anxieties of complex familial relations. The last moral tract, “Lazy Wife” (Lan poniang 懶婆娘) satirizes the lazy, greedy, and incorrigible wife.

The “Narrative Ballads” in Part Two include the “Tale of Third Sister” (Sangu ji 三姑記), the story of a filial daughter and loyal wife who refused to leave her destitute husband at the suggestion of her callous mother. The “Daughter of the Xiao Family” (Xiaoshi nü 肖氏女) and “Lady Luo” (Luoshi nü 羅氏女) present tales that celebrate the ideal qualities of daughters-in-law: chastity, filiality,
obedience and perseverance. The first story tells of the reunion of Lady Xiao and her husband after
eighteen years. Lady Luo, in the second story, committed suicide in response to her long-absent
husband's infidelity and as a demonstration of her chastity.

Also in Part Two are two versions of the familiar ballad of the “Maiden Meng Jiang” (Mengjiang nü 孟姜女). One tells of her eventual retrieval of her husband's bones, while the second
has Meng Jiang waiting endlessly for a husband who never returns. The story of the “Flower Seller”
(Maihua nü 賣花女) tells of a certain Lady Zhang who resists abduction and rape, and is eventually
saved by Judge Bao. “The Demonic Carp” (Liyu jing 鯉魚精) describes a carp spirit's seduction and
captivity of a young scholar by taking on the guise of his betrothed, Lady Jin. She also seeks out Judge
Bao to clear her name. In the famous tale of the “Karmic Affinity of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai”
(Liangzhu yingyuan 梁祝姻縁), Zhu disguises herself as a young man, goes to Hangzhou to study and
meets Liang Shanbo, with whom she falls in love. After three years, she returns home and is betrothed
to another man. Liang dies of grief as a result. Zhu eventually reunites with Liang by jumping into his
tomb and the pair ascend to heaven as “mandarin ducks.” The final story, “Fifth Daughter Wang”
(Wangwu niang 王五娘), tells of Lady Wang whose piety and religiosity save her from the fires and
punishments of hell and allow her to be reborn as a man.

These texts promote idealized female qualities (diligence, chastity, filial piety) preferably
practised within the inner quarters. But the heroines admired by the women of Jiangyong had to leave
home in order for their narratives to unfold. Third Sister traveled to deliver greetings for her mother's
birthday; Lady Zhang was abducted en route; Meng Jiang journeyed to the Great Wall; Zhu Yingtai
went to study in Hangzhou; and Fifth Daughter Wang breezed through different levels of hell. Their
solitary travels set the stage for the aberrant events or life-saving encounters, and consequently
challenge the prescription of the home-bound woman. Thrust into the dangerous outside world, their
wit, religiosity, courage and tenacity make them heroines. Men in these ballads are silent, feeble or
immoral. Compared to popular vernacular novels, often featuring male heroes, warfare, political
intrigues, pugilism, and polygyny, these ballads celebrate only female protagonists. Idema rightly
cautions against labeling these works “feminist” (p. 8) because despite their female-centeredness, none
of the women sought to challenge the patriarchal order, and none were able to escape the female
condition (childbirth).

These ballads offer scholars a chance to study popular prosimetrical literature enjoyed by a
specific audience in one location and time. The work will also be indispensable for the classroom
because it offers such a rich trove of popular culture. The book was a real pleasure to read, especially
since Idema's translation is vivid, clear and lively. This is a welcome addition to other studies of nüshu
by Anne McLaren, Liu Feiwen, and Cathy Silber.
(Margaret Wee Siang Ng, McGill University, Montreal)