

Women's Role in Pre-1900 Chinese Literature

In 1988 Disney released *Mulan*, an animated film based on the classic legend and famous poem, Ballad of Mulan. The story depicts a heroine whose father is drafted to serve a military duty for China. He is too ill to go, and his only son is too young to be enlisted. His daughter Mulan chooses to disguise herself as a man to serve in her father's place. Later, she becomes a revered general and is honored by the Emperor for her patriotic achievements. Only then does she reveal her feminine identity, and return home to her parents. Then, Mulan takes off her armor, dresses in her old clothes, and resumes her life as a woman. This continuing legacy of Mulan, and many brave heroines of pre-1900 China, attracts Dr. Li Guo, an associate professor for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Utah State University. Her work explores such tales of female heroism by women authors, and their efforts to gain writerly agency in a literary domain largely dominated by male authors in dynastic China.

In 2015 Guo published a monograph titled *Women's Tanci Fiction in Late Imperial and Early Twentieth-Century China*. This research focused primarily on chantefable fiction by women from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. This historical period is particularly stimulating because it was a time when women's literary activities became more prominent in a traditionally male dominated environment. Women's role during the late imperial period demonstrates that they were prepared to take on more roles in the literary terrain as; poets, dramatists, novelists, and editors, despite the Confucian orthodox constraints about women's speech. As more women began to take a part in literary creation, a feminine legacy was created and exerted seminal influences on male and female readers. Women's desire to articulate themselves through literature during the Ming and Qing helped expand and reconfigure their societal and cultural roles. Guo's first book focuses on this idea by on discussing the so-called

tanci fiction, or chantefable narratives. These narratives are written in seven-character rhymed verse and are at the length of a novel.

Chantefable fiction originated from the early performing narrative traditions of South China which involved singing, chanting and telling stories to audiences in tea-houses. These oral traditions contributed to the characterization of this genre in literature, and to the feminine legacy therein. In the late imperial period, chantefable narratives were taken up and developed at great length by women authors. These literary products were intended to be read by women readers in the boudoir, or inner chambers. The development of this fictional genre is what characterizes one of women's breakthroughs in literature in Chinese history. Such phenomenon took place when women writers of domestic novels, like Jane Austen, began emerging in Europe and western culture. This early modern era is characterized by women gaining and endorsing a distinctively gendered voice through writing. Guo studies cross-cultural resonances between women's role in Chinese literary culture, and the "continuing legacies of women's writing endeavors in a global context." Guo stated, "During dynastic periods, chantefable narratives were still considered of lower status, in comparison with the more elite form of poetry. However, chantefable novels provide a good venue for women to claim it as a feminine genre of writing." As chantefable novels gained popularity so did the other writing done by women; this paved the way for greater social and cultural impacts to be made by women.

The pre-1900 period witnesses many pioneering examples of women's active endeavors of breaking through the boundary between inner chambers and the outside world. Historically, women's writing largely circulated within the domestic sphere because women were confined to their chambers. During the Ming and Qing periods, women began to break the barriers between the inner chamber and the outside world and gain more publicity as writers. Women of

governing class were endorsed and encouraged to write by their male counterparts. Sometimes they even received family support for learning and publishing.

Despite some social constraints on women's education and advancement; social acceptance and readership of women's poetry, fiction, and drama gained substantial progress during this era. Thus women authors attracted communities of appreciative readers who were interested in reading and endorsing women's literature. In addition, literati scholars began appreciate and endorse their work which allowed women a pathway to the upper societal realm of writing.

Popular stories of the time include narratives about women who disguise their identity to flee from family calamity, to explore new societal roles, or to fight on the battlefield. In these narratives, when the disguised female characters' true identity is found out, their seemingly unconventional deeds are granted tolerance and even rewards. Some women characters become generals, a role through which they gain a degree of moral and military agency. Women characters who dress-up like men to travel and learn as men's equals. Some texts allude to fantastic tales about female deities, swordswomen, and Daoist immortals.

These narratives from the Ming and Qing lead Guo to the conception of her second book. Guo is planning to write about women's war narratives in late imperial China and to elaborate on the role these stories played in women's political power throughout the age. Guo resorts to a historical vision to contextualize literary texts and analyze readership. Her work pays attention to textual close reading, and the gathering of less discussed and many times untranslated materials. A large percentage of the books she researches are considered "rare." Digital databases assisted her research; however, there have been some constraints on these materials because of copyright issues. This challenge limits progress in some directions, and requires large amount of time in

field work. With this current project, she is aiming to take a humanist approach to understanding pre-1900 women's literature in China. Doing so means she will analyze classical text with a new perspective, advocating for more understanding of the subject and for a global readership. This method provides a map of the heroines in the stories; which leads to in-depth appreciation of the characters' fictional sojourns in the context of women's social and domestic lives in the historical realm. Analysis through a humanist lens allows Guo to discover intersections of the authors' personal history, literary creations, and the intellectual communities around the authors. She believes that this is an exciting field of study to explore.

Her book *Women's Tanci Fiction in Late Imperial and Early Twentieth-Century China*, is written in English and published by Purdue University Press. It draws from narratives written in rhymed verse and many of these texts were not available in English translation. Although the original texts are too challenging to be used directly in current classrooms, Guo shares samples of Chinese poetry and fiction with her students in her classes and encourages students to work with these fascinating materials through translation. Guo gives students opportunities to compose reflections about working with classic and modern literary texts. This flexible approach allows students a relaxed and collegial way to discuss how dynastic Chinese literature can be translated and portrayed to a modern audience.

Exciting research is emerging in the realm of Chinese women's literature studies. Guo continues to enrich Utah State University with her research, and the quality of her classes. Her work fosters new ideas and continues to gain recognition in the study of Chinese Women's literature, and contribute to scholarly dialogues about women's narrative traditions in a global context.

By Erin Dimond

