

Introduction

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Chinese women have been a vital subject of study in Europe and North America since the second half of the nineteenth century, with successive generations of scholars and writers dedicated to dispelling what Sarah Pike Conger called the “pronounced misrepresentation of China’s womanhood” (Conger viii). From Conger’s *Letters from China: With Particular Reference to the Empress Dowager and the Women of China* (1909), to Julia Kristeva’s *Des Chinoises [About Chinese Women]*, originally published in 1971, and the recent *Women in Song and Yuan China* (2020) by Bret Hinsch, the study of Chinese women has undergone significant shifts over time, reflecting changing social values, scholarly approaches, and feminist or gender theories, but it has remained constant in its ability to generate interest among various groups of readers. To the long list of noteworthy authors on the topic, a new generation of scholars adds its voice to the conversation with this volume, *Crossing Borders and Confounding Identity: Chinese Women in Literature, Art, and Film*.

The scholarship represented here remains as imperative as when Conger first attempted to shine the “light of understanding” on Euro-American ignorance of women in China. Misrepresentations of Chinese women still abound in contemporary media, whether in the stereotypical figures of the Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady, or in the more recent incarnation of the Tiger Mom, overshadowing the more significant achievements of women such as Tu Youyou (b. 1930), the first Chinese winner of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, or Tsai Ing-wen (b. 1956), Taiwan’s first

female president. Even Disney's live-action film *Mulan* (2020), featuring a martial female protagonist, reinforces the stereotype of the submissive and subordinate Chinese woman as a normative ideal. Such stereotypes find no place in this collection, which takes the thematic focus of women crossing borders and boundaries of various types, whether of geography, culture, or media. With its particular emphasis on literature and the arts, *Crossing Borders and Confounding Identity* advances our understanding of the diversity of women's experiences and achievements in China and adds complexity and nuance to this picture at a time when tensions between China and the United States run high.

Chapter 1, Dona M. Cady's "Emily Georgiana Kemp: An Early Twentieth-Century Traveler's Perspective on the Heart-Mind of China," brings to light the travel accounts of Kemp (1860–1939), an intrepid explorer, prolific writer, gifted artist, and interfaith advocate, who traveled through China in the late Qing and early Republican periods. The daughter of a wealthy British cotton mill owner, and one of the earliest graduates of Somerville College, Oxford, Kemp was a founding member of the World Congress of Faiths and an adventurous traveler. Although less well known today than Isabella Bird, Kemp achieved recognition in her own time for her travel accounts, and she was the first woman awarded the French Geographical Society's Grande Médaille de Vermeil. Cady argues that Kemp wrote from deeply religious and feminist perspectives and that her accounts of China are "remarkably free from imperialist cultural stereotypes" and the missionary gaze, despite her family connections with missionary work. Perceptively, Kemp wrote in 1921 that her "rooted conviction is that the future of the world depends largely on what happens in China during the next decade" (Kemp 11). Little could Kemp have imagined that these words would ring equally true a century later. Although not focused on Chinese women per se, Cady's chapter demonstrates how a British woman traveler's identity is reconfigured by crossing borders and by her encounters with the Other in China, including Chinese women of diverse class backgrounds. Roughly a generation older than American writer Pearl S. Buck (1892–1973), who appears in two later chapters of this volume, Kemp was among the pioneering foreign women writers who became deeply embedded in China and key interpreters of Chinese women's experiences for Western audiences.

Chapter 2 shifts backward in time and to a male perspective as Marla Hoffman Lunderberg's "Women's Agency at the Close of the Ming Dynasty: Vulnerability, Violation, and Vengeance in Ling Mengchu's Ver-

“vernacular Short Stories” explores the representation of sexual violence and its aftermath in a seventeenth-century short story. One of the masters of the Ming vernacular short story, Ling Mengchu (1580–1644), first published “Wine Within Wine: Old Nun Chao Plucks a Frail Flower; Craft Within Craft: The Scholar Chia Gains Sweet Revenge” in 1628 in his much-celebrated *Chuke pai’an jingqi* (*Slapping the Table in Amazement, First Collection*). As with most stories in this collection, this short story is in fact two stories in one, each a tale of an assault survivor, but with vastly different outcomes. Following in the path of Kimberly Besio’s examination of Ming adaptations of the Wang Zhaojun legend and Wai-ye Li’s work on representations of female virtue in relation to larger historical processes, Lundberg analyzes cultural constructions of virtuous women and Ling’s moralizing in this complex, nuanced vernacular short story. Lundberg argues that this double narrative has an allegorical dimension, because the physical assaults endured by the female protagonists “parallel the violations of traditional value systems faced by the people living in a culture in chaos” at the end of the Ming. The protagonists represent not only the vulnerabilities experienced by women at the close of the dynasty but also the multiple ways they could respond, from resignation and accommodation to revenge. Lundberg concludes that despite Ling’s reputation for sometimes “cloying” moralizing in his vernacular fiction, in this story he raises both politically sensitive and psychologically fraught questions. This chapter elucidates Ling’s brilliance in dealing with issues that remain germane in our own time and highlights the subject of female agency, a key thread running through this volume.

Continuing our literary explorations, female virtue is again a theme in chapter 3, which takes us to Japan with Catherine Ryu’s work on “A Flight of Cultural Imagination in Heian Japan: The Image of Yang Guifei in *Genji monogatari* and ‘Chang hen ge.’” Bringing together two canonical works in East Asian literature—Murasaki Shikibu’s (fl. ca. 1012) *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) (ca. eleventh c.) and Bai Juyi’s (772–846) “Changhen ge” (“Song of Everlasting Sorrow”) (806)—and employing the expansive conceptual framework of Silk Road studies, this chapter examines famous Chinese beauty Yang Guifei (719–756) as a literary motif in Heian Japan. Ryu demonstrates how *Genji monogatari*’s female author employs the figure of a *maboroshi*—the Japanese counterpart of the Daoist wizard who links the desires of the living and the dead in “Changhen ge”—to transform the image of Lady Yang. Robustly engaging with the border-crossing themes of this volume, Ryu’s essay demonstrates

how “not only objects and people but also intangible literary motifs and their attendant ideas moved through Silk Roads, transforming a local society’s worldview and cultural production in the process.” Through her analysis of Murasaki Shikibu’s use of the Lady Yang motif in her narrative of ill-fated lovers, Ryu demonstrates how this tragic romantic figure’s circulation along the Silk Roads enabled her dramatic transformation as a fictional heroine.

Shifting from the virtuous women of chapter 2 and the tragic beauties chapter 3, in chapter 4, “Women Generals and Martial Maidens: China’s Warrior Women in History, Literature, and Film,” Cheryl C. D. Hughes examines women warriors as characters who defy the Western stereotype of Chinese women as meek and subservient. Warrior women in Chinese narratives, she shows, prove themselves equal (or at times superior) to their male counterparts in martial skill, bravery, and accomplishments. This chapter demonstrates how women warriors “cross the traditional boundaries of home and family to establish new possibilities and identities for themselves and others.” Hughes provides an overview of women generals and other martial heroines from the Shang dynasty through Maoist China, including the famed Mulan, who is best known to Western audiences. Her materials include historical narratives, various literary genres, and film, thus covering a broad sweep of cultural production across the centuries. Hughes argues that the figure of the woman warrior has endured in Chinese culture as a role model of bravery and virtue for both men and women. In fighting for their homelands, their families, or just causes, women warriors, Hughes notes, “crossed boundaries to establish new identities for themselves in a patriarchal society.” Fans of Disney’s *Mulan* movies will find much to appreciate in this chapter, which greatly advances our understanding of the much broader part played by the woman warrior across centuries of Chinese history, literature, and film, a figure who appears again in chapter 9. This chapter further introduces the study of film, taken up again in chapters 6, 7, and 9.

Gender and theatrical roles and cross-dressing are vital topics in chapter 5, “Women in Male Roles: Cross-Dressed Actresses in Early Twentieth-Century China.” In this chapter, Laura Xie examines the history of female actors playing male roles in the *Jingju* tradition, using the case study of Meng Xiaodong (1908–1977). In sharp contrast to the attention given to actors like Mei Lanfang (1894–1961), who is celebrated for his performance of female roles in *Jingju* theater, relatively little has been written about female performers of male roles, especially

those who performed in public theaters. As the foremost impersonator of male roles on the Jingju stage, Meng has an important place in the history of Chinese operatic theater. Known for her brilliant singing, her specialty playing the “bearded man” role, and her controversial offstage love affairs—one with Mei Lanfang and the other with Shanghai crime boss Du Yuesheng (1888–1951)—Meng’s life and theatrical career provide an opportunity to examine the phenomenon of female stardom in early twentieth-century China. This chapter probes the complex interactions among Meng’s attempts to control her own image, the commercial imperatives of the news media, and the emergence of cultural myths surrounding her persona. Xie argues that in the early twentieth century, actresses playing male roles challenged male dominance in the theatrical world and contested patriarchal cultural norms, much as did the women warriors in chapter 4. Testing the willingness of audiences to accept fluid gender roles, their performances highlighted shifting notions and ideals of masculinity in this time. Xie further emphasizes that on the individual level, the opportunity to play male roles on the stage gave female actors a pathway for gaining recognition and prestige for their craft and technique, rather than their physical beauty, though they had numerous obstacles to overcome. Xie demonstrates that after a decline in the popularity of female actors playing male roles, there was a revival of interest in female-to-male cross-dressing in Jingju in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This chapter is especially relevant for readers interested in the performative aspects of gender.

We return to film in chapter 6, “*Pavilion of Women: Gender Politics and Global Cultural Translatability*,” where Jinhua Li delves into complex questions of global media consumption, the flows of texts and resources, and deterritorialization in relation to transnational film production. The case study in this essay is *Tingyuan li de nüren* (2001) by Hong Kong director Ho Yim (b. 1952), a Chinese-language adaptation of Nobel Prize laureate Pearl S. Buck’s novel *Pavilion of Women* and the first joint production between a major Hollywood studio and a Chinese government-owned studio. Li considers film remakes in particular to be situated “at a critical juncture where axes of representation, gender, power, and identity converge and clash.” Li demonstrates how transnational, border-crossing film adaptations by their very nature are contested sites for the intersection and interaction of the presumed dichotomies of global/local, west/east, transnational/national, Eurocentric/polycentric, masculine/feminine, and center/periphery. Li argues that despite the filmmakers’ assertion that

Tingyuan li de nüren tells a story of women's emancipation, this avowedly feminist message is ultimately undercut by the visual narrative. Through careful analysis of various cinematographic elements, this chapter shows the strong contrast between the diegetic articulation of women's pursuit of individual freedom and gender equality, on one hand, and the cinematography, on the other, which never places women in positions of agency. Li argues, "the film's narrative is constantly at war with its discourse." She further argues that Eurocentric and androcentric discourses are evident at multiple levels in the film: linguistic, structural, and cinematographic. This chapter shows the discrepancy in reception of the film in China and the United States and argues that the filmmakers' attempt to achieve "global cultural translatability through local media literacy" was superficial at best. Li concludes that despite this co-production's unprecedented experimentations in form and content, the bifurcated cultural politics of global media translatability ultimately resulted in the subordination of the feminist potential of the female protagonist's narrative to deeply embedded masculine Eurocentrism. This chapter contributes to our understanding of Pearl Buck, one of the chief architects of Western understandings of China in the twentieth century and a figure we meet again in chapter 9.

Continuing our foray into film studies, chapter 7, Yanhong Zhu's "Gendered Screens: Women, Space, and Social Transformation in the Works of Contemporary Chinese Female Filmmakers," examines the films of two women directors, Peng Xiaolian (1953–2019) and Xu Jinglei (b. 1974), as representatives of two generations of Chinese filmmakers. Setting their works in the context of a broader rise of female directors since the 1990s, and especially the 2000s, this chapter focuses on the directors' cinematic depiction of space, specifically domestic space, urban space, and the space of artistic creation. Discussing representative films, Zhu analyzes the relation between representations of spatial conditions and changing gender roles in contemporary Chinese society. She argues that both directors use space in their films not merely as the physical settings for their narratives but as a vehicle to probe the effect of processes of social transformation on the spatial order of contemporary Chinese society. Space also serves as the site for the formation of female consciousness. Supporting Lingzhen Wang's contention that Chinese women's cinema defies "uniform interpretation," Zhu concludes that female filmmakers in contemporary China have found various pathways for demonstrating their individual agency and reconfiguring gender roles while engaging with a spectrum of aesthetic conventions. This chapter also includes

a brief discussion of Peng's musings on the affordances of digital and celluloid film. Comparing digital film to *Shikumen* houses, Peng argues that "despite their glory, digital data can also be lost when the equipment breaks just like the *Shikumen* houses." As experiences prove fleeting, so do the digital representations of these experiences.

Following in the intellectual footsteps of Emily Georgiana Kemp, the subject of chapter 1, Shelley Drake Hawks is an artist and a student of Chinese art, and her work in chapter 8 brings us forward with an insightful survey of "Women in Chinese Visual Arts over the Past Century." Hawks argues that even though men still dominate the contemporary art scene in China, feminism has played a role in the development of the visual arts since the early twentieth century. As she shows, in the early twentieth century, China's newly established art academies in Shanghai and other cities began to welcome female students, initiating profound changes down the line as women became professional artists or stayed at the academies as teachers. The novel perspectives they brought to art and art education challenged gender stereotypes of the time. Hawks discusses in detail ten diverse artists and examines whether and how feminism is influencing the development of their works and broader trends in art history. Prompted by Chinese women artists, this chapter asks whether feminism, as broadly understood in Europe and North America, is a productive lens for analyzing the lived experiences of Chinese women. Like Kemp, Hawks seeks to understand the range of Chinese women's experiences on their own terms. She concludes that "Chinese women artists have coalesced into a powerful force for innovation," as reform-minded female artists have joined with their male counterparts to challenge gender bias and redefined notions of beauty and strength. Through her survey of artistic works, as well as interviews with artists, Hawks demonstrates how women artists "have introduced new subject matter, fresh techniques, and materials to Chinese art." For readers unfamiliar with contemporary Chinese art, this chapter provides a stimulating overview.

Turning our attention to herstory, Jessica A. Sheetz-Nguyen's contribution in chapter 9, "Lessons for Women': From *The Good Earth* to *Leftover Women*," builds on the author's experience teaching Chinese women's history for over a decade. This chapter offers a model for instructors who want to develop curricula addressing how Chinese women's lives have changed dramatically between 1844 and 2000. Sheetz-Nguyen aims to provoke readers and students to confront tough questions head-on through comparative inquiry. "For example, what did it mean for a woman to bear

an infant girl in the fourth century? What does it mean for her to bear an infant girl in the twenty-first century? How might their situations have changed for their daughters?" This chapter provides readers with a rich survey of texts and films, as well as suggestions for comparative materials dealing with European and North American history in the same timeframe. Sheetz-Nguyen covers a broad sweep of history, beginning with Confucius and ending with the contemporary moment, and suggests how we might reconfigure "history" as "herstory." This chapter again shows the key influence of Pearl Buck, whose 1931 novel, *The Good Earth*, was highly influential through its theatrical and film adaptations, and we meet the figure of the woman warrior examined in chapter 4. Departing from more familiar material, Sheetz-Nguyen's discussion of the contemporary phenomenon of "leftover women," in particular, covers a subject that has drawn recent media scrutiny but has received less scholarly attention to date. Like the discussion of sexual violence in chapter 2 and gender-fluid roles in chapters 4 and 5, readers will find much in Sheetz-Nguyen's examination of leftover women to think through issues at the forefront of cultural politics today.

All together, these chapters provide a new window onto Chinese women, their lived experiences and fictional representations, across a broad spectrum of literature (Chinese and non-Chinese), theater, film, and the visual arts. They provide food for thought on border crossing across multiple dimensions, as manifest in travel writing, translation and cross-cultural adaptation, transnational capital flows and collaborative production, cross-dressing, or contestations of gender roles or notions of normative sexuality. Building on a robust tradition of scholarship on women in China, which saw a special flourishing in the 1990s, this volume adds to our knowledge on women as individual actors and agents across time and space. The chapters are written for a general audience and will be of interest to scholars of China and nonspecialists alike.

Over a century after Conger's *Letters from China, Crossing Borders and Confounding Identity* prompts us to ask pressing questions about the need and demand for scholarly work dedicated to the study of Chinese women. In what ways do Chinese women continue to constitute a particular field of study? To what degree do Chinese women continue to be marginalized, even doubly marginalized, in European and North American academia? In media and popular culture? What does it mean to speak of herstory a half-century after this term was coined? As I wrote in an earlier critique of the construct of the "traditional Chinese woman" in

Western scholarship, “the study of women, or gender, in China must be a two-way process: Western theory must be incorporated into the study of China and research on China must be used to generate particular theories of gender from the ground up, theories that could either inform or challenge general theories of gender”(Teng 143). This goal, I argue, remains as relevant today as women, in China and beyond, continue to confront systemic inequality and hierarchy around the world.

Works Cited

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