

## Women's Voices in Pre-modern East Asian Literature

Paula Berggren

Department of English

Baruch College

[exeasmail@columbia.edu](mailto:exeasmail@columbia.edu)

### Table of Contents

1. Themes and Goals
2. Audience and Uses
3. Section I: Selections from the *Shijing (The Book of Odes)*
  - A. Instructor's Introduction
  - B. Instructor Readings
  - C. Student Readings
  - D. Student Activity
  - E. Comparative Opportunities
4. Section II: Selections from Heian and Kamakura Women's Writing
  - A. Instructor's Introduction
  - B. Instructor Readings
  - C. Student Readings
  - D. Student Activity
  - E. Comparative Opportunities
5. Section III: Selections from the Work of Gu Ruopu
  - A. Instructor's Introduction
  - B. Instructor Readings
  - C. Student Readings
  - D. Student Activity
  - E. Comparative Opportunities
6. Further Reading

### Additional Documents: Selections from the Work of Gu Ruopu

- Gu Ruopu. "When I Hired a Teacher to Instruct the Girls, Someone Ridiculed Me, So as a Joke I have Written This Retort to Explain Matters." Translated by Maureen Robertson
- Gu Ruopu. "Letter to My Sons." Translated by Dorothy Ko

### 1. Themes and Goals

This unit explores women's roles in the literary traditions of East Asia, paying special attention to women's important contributions to the pre-modern literary canons of China and Japan. The readings have been chosen to acquaint students with a range of female voices and activities as they are reflected in East Asian poems and diaries.

The selected texts represent three important historical moments:

- 1) the ancient world that produced the Chinese *Shijing* (*Shih-ching*; *The Book of Odes*), compiled in the 7th century B.C.E.;
- 2) the courts of Heian and Kamakura Japan (794-1333 C.E.) in which aristocratic women invented a sophisticated literary language; and
- 3) the intellectual ferment of Ming China (1368-1644 C.E.) that produced a rich female discourse, exemplified here in the writings of GU Ruopu.

Reading these selections should help students see that despite social constraints, women expressed themselves in ways that still speak to us today. These voices from distant times and places remain fresh and engaging because they express broad human concerns that continue to play a part in our everyday lives.

The first two sections should make students sensitive to the enduring human preoccupation with love. This is, of course, not likely to be news to college students, but it is sometimes news to them that people thought about similar things “back then.” The comparative opportunities guide them to a sense of where and how culture affects the expression of romantic sentiments. For the study of the *Shijing* in particular, the frequency of the female voice in these ancient poems is an important marker of the recognition that women’s lives mattered, even in rigidly organized early societies. For the Japanese texts, students should understand that the predominance of great women writers testifies to one of the high points of world literary history, a moment when female sensibilities set a standard of excellence that has yet to be exceeded. For the study of GU Ruopu, the goal is to encourage students to read carefully and form opinions about the personalities and the circumstances of talented women who spoke their feelings in poetry and (notably in this case) prose. Students may find it productive to compare the experiences of learned women during the Ming with those of early modern French salonnières and the “bluestockings” of eighteenth-century England.

## 2. Audience and Uses

These readings and exercises were developed for a general education course in world literature. They could be included in any introductory level literature course at the high school or college level, or as supplementary materials in an introduction to Women’s Studies, general writing, or a broad history course, and are addressed to students with little experience of poetry or of cultures and time periods other than their own.

The unit is designed to be useful to a wide variety of undergraduate courses, including but not limited to:

- World Literature
- Premodern East Asian History
- Premodern East Asian Literature
- Women’s Literature
- Women’s Studies

The three sections can be used together, or instructors may pick and choose based on amount of the time available. If used together, the material is likely to require three 55-minute class sessions. In a comparative literature class, units may be assigned in tandem with works by writers from the West, as suggested below.

### 3. Section I: Selections from the *Shijing*

#### 3A. Instructor's Introduction

The *Shijing* (also known as *Shih ching*, *Book of Odes*, *Book of Songs*, *Classic of Poetry*, and *Classic of Odes*) is an anthology of over 300 poems and songs dating from as early as the twelfth century B.C.E. One of the most influential texts in the Chinese tradition, it was canonized in the early Han dynasty (202 BC – 9 AD) as one of the Five Classics. As such, the text became a key component of the educational curriculum. Candidates for official posts had to demonstrate their mastery of the text in civil service examinations. Over the centuries, this canonical status gave rise to an enormous body of annotations, commentaries and interpretations.

A fair number of the poems included in the *Shijing* are spoken by women. No one knows, unfortunately, whether these poems were actually the work of female poets or of men who assumed a feminine voice. The selections recommended below only touch on the variety of situations and perspectives on life observed in this extraordinary book. Each poem suggests the limitations of the female experience in ancient China at the same time that it emphasizes a different phase in a woman's life and a strong individual's response to a particular set of constraints. Although Confucian scholars produced arcane interpretations of even the simplest poems, for the purposes of these lessons, you need only attend to the immediate human situations they depict. As Stephen OWEN says in the essay cited below, "The songs of courtship and marriage are generally the least marked by cultural differences and perhaps the easiest of the songs for a modern Western reader to appreciate immediately" ("Foreword," from *The Book of Songs*, translated by Arthur WALEY, p. xx).

The poems selected for this lesson mark a progression through easily recognizable stages of romantic attachment. Ode #20 ("Plop Fall the Plums"), spoken by a woman who seems to be growing increasingly nervous about her prospects for marriage, plays on a pun that links "plum" with "matchmaker." Ode #26 ("Cypress Boat") "is the song of a lady whose friends tried to marry her against her inclinations" (preface to Ode #26 in *The Book of Songs*, translated by Arthur WALEY. New York: Grove Press, 1996, p. 23). Each stanza is defined by a powerful image that should elicit interesting discussion: the boat tossed on the sea is a figure for the speaker's agitated heart, and her honest resistance to the pressures brought upon her by others takes on different connotations as the poem elaborates on her plight. The reference to "an unwashed dress," Stephen OWEN has pointed out, reinforces our sense of this woman's strength of character — the problems are external and imposed on her from without. The young woman who speaks in #76 ("I Beg You, Zhong Zi") has chosen her lover, but she remains mindful of her reputation. As Mr. Zhong gets closer and closer, she tries to put him off. Students will see that the battering down of natural protective walls (from willow to mulberry tree to hardwood) suggests a sexual advance that the speaker does not totally discourage. And in #94 ("Out in the

Bushlands a Creeper Grows”), a willing woman has only praise for the beautiful man who has brought her satisfaction.

### 3B. Instructor Readings

- \*\*\* Most important
- \*\* Recommended
- \* Optional

- \*\*\* OWEN, Stephen. “Foreword.” In *The Book of Songs*, translated by Arthur WALEY. New York: Grove Press, 1996. Pages xii-xxv.

One of today’s foremost authorities on Chinese literature, Owen has supplied a fine general introduction to Waley’s popular translations, which were originally published in 1937. The 1996 edition also has a helpful map showing geographical sites referred to in the poems as well as annotated lists identifying mythological figures and historical events alluded to in the *Shijing*.

- \*\* WATSON, Burton. “Introduction.” In *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: From Early Times to the Thirteenth Century* translated and edited by Burton WATSON. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. Pages 1-14.

This essay by a noted translator outlines the basic themes of early Chinese poetry and surveys its typical forms and styles.

- \*\*\* YU, Pauline. The Book of Songs, in *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective: A Guide For Teaching* edited by Barbara Stoler MILLER. New York: Sharpe, 1994. Pages 211-221.
- \*\* YU, Pauline. *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Note especially Chapter Two, “Imagery in the Classic of Poetry.” In reference to Poem #20, see the critical comment on the word plum, which “is homophonous with matchmaker...; it is for this reason that the poet saw the plum to evoke a stimulus” (pp. 64-65).

### 3C. Student Readings

Selections from the *Shijing*. Translator Arthur WALEY's titles are given.

#20 "Plop Fall the Plums"

#26 "Cypress Boat"

#76 "I Beg You, Zhong Zi"

#94 "Out in the Bushlands a Creeper Grows"

Translations from *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 4 by James LEGGE (1898) are available on the University of Virginia Website: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/chinese/shijing/AnoShih.html>

If you wish to use a hard copy of the text and are unable to locate the LEGGE version, another excellent source is Stephen OWEN, edited and translated, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W.W. Norton: 1996).

### 3D. Student Activity

Try to generate discussion and allow students to see that they can make personal connections with these materials. These literary explorations do not lend themselves to single, "right" answers.

- These poems are short enough to have students read them aloud; different students may be asked to read successive stanzas so that several of them are involved in one stage of discussion. Since ballads like these organize themselves by repeating but varying key phrases, it is worth focusing on this element first. Ask students to guess what happens between the stanzas that causes the changes.
- Discuss prominent images in the poems; the management of tone (even in translation); the progressive nature of the ballad structure (from seven plums to one, for example); the suggestive detail (as in #26, for example: sorrow "like an unwashed dress." Although interpretations differ, it is worth asking whether this is a problem that would preoccupy a male speaker.)
- You may also want to set questions about the poems in an electronic forum discussion as an alternative to or an extension of the activities mentioned above. Here are some sample questions that may be applied for any lyric or ballad: Who is the speaker in "\_\_\_\_"? What is this poem about? How does the mood/situation change from stanza to stanza?

### 3E. Comparative Opportunities

Ballads are very teachable. A few of the Chinese Odes work well set against Egyptian love lyrics, which (at least in the translation suggested below) tend to be less schematic as well as less strait-laced, so the comparison encourages a wide-ranging discussion of how cultural sensibilities evolve. The Chinese poems evoke a world of anxious women in a cold climate; the linen-clad aristocrats of the Egyptian poems enjoy themselves a great deal more. Students can often identify with each.

FOSTER, John L., trans. *Love Songs of the New Kingdom*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.

FOSTER, John L., trans. *Ancient Egyptian Literature: An Anthology*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. See particularly “Love, how I’d love to slip down to the pond” and “I was simply off to see Nefrus my friend.”

## 4. Section II: Selections from Heian and Kamakura Women’s Writing

### 4A. Instructor’s Introduction

The Heian period of Japanese history (794-1185) was an aristocratic age during which women were influential members of the imperial court. In this respect the era bears some similarity to the twelfth century in Western Europe, when worship of the Virgin Mary and the ideals of courtly love glorified women — at least according to the norms approved by the dominant patriarchal culture of the time. During this epoch in Japan, the language of politics — the language of men — was Chinese. In a broad sense, the rise of the Japanese vernacular during the Heian period parallels the development of vernacular literature in English and in the Romance languages, a long process that continued over many centuries, beginning in the West in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the case of Heian Japan, however, vernacularization started somewhat earlier and was largely the work of a group of women writers. The impact of these writers on Japanese culture remained unparalleled in the West until European and American women began to write novels in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Ladies-in-waiting in the courts and highborn women in the capital and the provinces spent their days writing poetry and keeping diaries. Their nights were dedicated to other pursuits, which were difficult for them to discuss aloud. Thus poems and diaries became crucial vehicles for self-expression; indeed, the earliest diaries simply introduced poems of one’s own composition, sent to friends as delicate records of the emotions that fueled these women’s lives.

SEI Shonagon (ca. 965 C.E.- ca. 1010 C.E.) was among the best known of these women writers, and her *Makura no soshi* (translated as *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*) initiated the genre known as *zuihitsu*, or “random writings.” As the selections assigned below demonstrate, *zuihitsu* were eclectic collections of personal writings on topics as various as the changing seasons, romantic encounters, and even lists of “elegant things.” Sei was a lady-in-waiting at the imperial

court, and her writings hint at the complex place of women during this period of literary efflorescence.

Though an innovator, Sei was hardly the first woman to make a significant contribution to Japan's literary history. ONO no Komachi (mid-9th century) was ranked among the country's Six Poetic Geniuses (*Rokkasen*) by KI no Tsurayuki (ca. 872-945 C.E.), who compiled Japan's first anthology of poetry, the *Kokinshu*, or *Collection of Poems from Ancient and Modern Times*. Commissioned by the Emperor Daigo (r. 897-930 C.E.) and completed by about 905, the *Kokinshu* is a collection of poems authored by some of early Japan's best-known writers. Of the 120 named poets represented in the anthology almost thirty were women. Foremost among these was Ono, who contributed eighteen poems. Eight of these have been assigned here.

The third student reading is drawn from a later period of Japanese history. Lady Nijo's memoirs begin with the loss of her virginity in the year 1271, when she was fourteen years old. A lady of the court who took several lovers, she eventually became a Buddhist nun, but hardly a reclusive one; the later chapters of her book tell of visits to shrines and meetings with a wide range of personalities. Although she writes with a keen appreciation for Heian culture, she is a product of the Kamakura period (1185-1333). Life in Kamakura Japan — so named because the period's military government was based in the city of Kamakura — was somewhat rougher than during its Heian predecessor. This gruff quality was reflected in much of the period's literature, which tended to either celebrate martial qualities or retreat into a Buddhist detachment from the everyday world and its uncertainties. Gone, to a great extent, were the more feminine sensibilities of Heian high culture. This was a feudal age when women's participation was greatly reduced, and, in at least in terms of what has been preserved, women's literary output was also less prominent. The aristocracy was impoverished and warriors' daughters were less likely to be literary in their pursuits.

#### 4B. Instructor Readings

- \*\*\* Most important
- \*\* Recommended
- \* Optional

- \*\*\* *The Confessions of Lady Nijo*. Translated by Karen BRAZELL. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976.

The introduction (pages xii-xxvii) is essential reading. For those with time, the entire memoir makes fascinating reading.

- \*\*\* KAMENS, Edward, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Murasaki Shikibu's 'The Tale Of Genji.'* New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1993.

For a sense of general background, read the introduction (pp. 3-30). For closer treatments of gender issues, see the essays by Sandra BUCKLEY and H. Mack HORTON, pp. 88-94 and 95-107.

- \*\*\* “Lyric text: Japanese,” In *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective: A Guide for Teaching*, edited by Barbara Stoler MILLER. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1993. Pages 376-377.

This brief unit by Haruo SHIRANE gives the Japanese text of ONO no Komachi’s *Kokinshu* poem #1030, and shows what happens to a 31-syllable Japanese poem in different translations. Looking at this set of texts allows for rich discussions of the way the structure and syntax of individual languages frame what a given language is capable of expressing.

- \*\* MCCULLOUGH, Helen Craig. *Brocade by Night: ‘Kokin Wakashu’ and the Court Style in Japanese Classical Poetry*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985.

A sophisticated commentary on the different contributors to the *Kokinshu* and their varying poetic styles. Pages 219-39 provide a valuable discussion of ONO no Komachi’s wordplay and major themes (including “the plight of the woman unhappy in love.”)

- \*\* MORRIS, Ivan I. *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*. New York: Knopf, 1964.

See especially Ch. 8, “The Women of Heian and their Relations to Men,” a Western-oriented overview of the mores, sexual and otherwise, which governed the Heian court.

- \*\* “The Vocabulary of Japanese Aesthetics I.” *Sources of Japanese Tradition: Vol. I*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

This is the title of Chapter 9, which includes two formative texts: the famous discussion of women and fiction in *The Tale of Genji* (chapter 25) and excerpts from a treatise by the twelfth-century critic FUJIWARA Teika, *Guide to the Composition of Poetry*.

#### 4C. Student Readings

- A selection of poems by the esteemed women poet ONO no Komachi (mid-ninth century, Heian period), from the *Kokinshu* (compiled in 905).

*Kokin Wakashu: The First Imperial Anthology of Japanese Poetry*. Translated and annotated by Helen Craig MCCULLOUGH. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985. See especially poems #113 (p. 113), 552 (p. 126), 553 (p. 126), 635 (p. 142), 656 (p. 146), 657 (p. 146), 658 (p. 146), 797 (p.174).

- SEI Shonagon (ca. 965 – ca. 1010). *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* (ca. 1001). Translated and edited by Ivan MORRIS. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

See especially “The Sliding Screen in the Back of the Hall” (pages 34-39), which describes a poetry competition set by the Emperor for the ladies-in-waiting of the Empress (of whom SEI Shonagon was one). Or, “When I Make Myself Imagine” (pages 39-40), in which SEI Shonagon expresses “scorn” for the “women who live at home,” thereby missing court sophistication and an understanding of manners and formalities. Or, any one of her lists, for example “Elegant Things” (page 69):

- A white coat worn over a violet waistcoat.
  - Duck eggs.
  - Shaved ice mixed with liana syrup and put in a new silver bowl.
  - A rosary of rock crystal.
  - Wisteria blossoms. Plum blossoms covered with snow.
  - A pretty child eating strawberries.
- *The Confessions of Lady Nijo*. Translated by Karen BRAZELL. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976. Pages 3-12; notes (pages 265-266).

This remarkable passage describes a young woman’s sexual initiation at the hands of Go-Fukakusa (1243-1304), the 89th Emperor of Japan. This is the beginning of the diary of a woman known as Lady Nijo (b. 1258); although the text was written ca. 1307, the single surviving manuscript was discovered in the library of the Imperial Household in Tokyo in 1940.

#### 4D. Student Activity

The *Kokinshu* poems are short enough to have students read them aloud. You may organize students into groups and ask them to work on different sets of poems, since the anthology’s principle of organization, grouping poems by different authors in thematic units (celebrating the seasons or reflecting on certain moods and activities), is itself worthy of discussion and promotes comparison-contrast exercises. Discuss prominent images in the poems; the management of tone (even in translation); and perhaps ask students to compose their own 31-syllable poems about a topic related to love, or the seasons, in the style of the *Kokinshu* poems.

You may want to set questions about them for an electronic forum discussion as an alternative to or an extension of the activities mentioned above. Here are some sample questions designed to show the “relevance” of these apparently arcane materials to our own lives.

- Who is the speaker? What is this poem about? What seems to be the prevalent mood?
  - For example, we know that ONO no Komachi, a woman, wrote selection #797. This poem comes from the section of the *Kokinshu* devoted to the final stage of a love affair, when it is on the wane and one lover loses interest before the other. This is a typical sentiment in an aesthetic system that prizes loss and attenuation rather than plenitude.

- What kinds of imagery dominate the lyric poems in the *Kokinshu*? What sorts of emotions do these short poems express?
  - Poem #797 speaks of a single blossom that fades, whose color is unknown — this bleaching out of nature’s riches contrasts tellingly with Western medieval poems of nature, which tend to be full of color and fragrance. Most of the poems in this royal anthology offer spare images that invite the reader to examine them. Let your students try out their own interpretations; they can hardly be wrong.
- Several of the *Kokinshu* poets, including Lady ISE and ONO no Komachi, were women. Do you think there is anything specifically feminine in their poems?
- In the manner of SEI Shonagon, make up your own list of “Elegant” and “Unsuitable Things” and try to explain the difference between your preferences and hers. What do our choices in such matters reveal about our natures and personalities?
  - This is an especially appealing exercise. Students have very strong opinions about such matters, many of them expressed in the imagery of prom night dates — stretch limousines and tuxedos have appeared on the lists that I have seen. They should be invited to consider how such social occasions contrast with the almost furtive world of the Heian court lovers.
- Judging from the writing of Lady Nijo and SEI Shonagon, what role did poetry play in aristocratic Japanese society?
  - Feelings that cannot be explicitly discussed are alluded to through allusions to poems that everyone in this world knew and recognized. “The Sliding Screen in the Back of the Hall” provides a fine illustration of the databases that the elite carried around in their heads, for this information was a key to social success.
- What kinds of details did both SEI Shonagon and Lady Nijo stress when speaking of the world in which they lived? How would you characterize their sensibilities?
  - Both SEI Shonagon and Lady Nijo are acutely aware of their physical surroundings and appreciate the potential meanings in every detail. Note the preoccupation with clothes and the colors of robes. Since costume is so frequently used in symbolic ways in literature, there are many opportunities for discussion here.
- Why do people keep diaries?
  - Readings from the diaries invite students to explore attitudes toward sexuality and marriage in Japanese aristocratic circles. Aristocratic Heian women exercised considerable power; they could inherit property and lived relatively independent lives within marriage. SEI Shonagon typically describes “wife-visiting marriages,” of the sort that we see so often in *The Tale of Genji*. (See the article by WAKITA Haruko mentioned in the “Further Reading” section.)
  - Connections may be found between the poems and the diaries that demonstrate the complex web of literary allusions that allowed persons to communicate without explicitly committing themselves to emotional statements. For example, Lady Nijo finds herself in bed with the emperor and thinks of quoting to him poem 712 from

the *Kokinshu*: “If this were a world without lies,” but thinks better of it. Ask your students to consider the way we too send each other subtle messages by means of allusion rather than direct statement, and ask them to define the kinds of circumstances in which we resort to indirect means like these. If you are reading Western texts as well, you might point your students to the famous moment in Canto V of Dante’s *Inferno* when Francesca blames her illicit affair with her brother-in-law Paolo on an Arthurian romance that the two of them read together. She doesn’t say this explicitly, but rather remarks, “Galleoto fu ‘l libro” (137). The allusion to Galleoto, a character who brings Lancelot and Guinevere together in *their* illicit love, allows Francesca to demonstrate to the pilgrim Dante how cultured she is and to exculpate herself at the same time. So by using literary allusion, well-read females, medieval or modern, are to a certain extent showing off.

#### 4E. Comparative Opportunities

Heian and Kamakura readings work well with medieval European literature. The role of women writers and the attitudes toward female sexuality provide natural areas for contrast. Good essay topics elicit interesting student writing. For example, ask students to compare ideas about adultery in *The Confessions of Lady Nijo* with some of Marie de FRANCE’s *lais* or Chaucer’s tales (notably *The Miller’s Tale* or *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*).

### 5. Section III: Selections from the Work of GU Ruopu

#### 5A. Instructor’s Introduction

Surveys of world literature often include units on the emergence of learned ladies in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. The very accessible texts offered below add GU Ruopu (KO Jo P’u) to the likes of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, Madame de SABLE, and Mary WOLLSTONECRAFT. A great deal of research in the last few decades has brought to light a wealth of writing by elite, educated women in the late Ming and Qing (Ch’ing) dynasties, roughly contemporaries of the women mentioned above. In choosing GU Ruopu to represent the accomplishments of female intellectuals in late imperial China, one may want to emphasize the care she takes to portray herself as a wife and mother. Using her family responsibilities as protective cover, she exemplifies the opportunities for well-born women to participate in poetry societies and immerse themselves in cultural pursuits. Gu was followed in these activities by four generations of her family’s women. In previous centuries, respectable women had little contact with talented women artists, who were often courtesans. By the sixteenth century, opportunities for women increased and the strict boundaries that had separated women into mutually exclusive categories began to break down. Dorothy KO’s book, cited under “Further Reading,” shows how the rise of itinerant female teachers brought many types of women into rewarding contact with each other.

## 5B. Instructor Readings

- \*\*\* CHANG, Kang-i Sun and Haun SAUSSY, eds. *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

This is a collection of recently translated writing. Part One contains hundreds of poems by women from ancient times to the twentieth century; Part Two contains critical writings. The notes on “Editorial Conventions” (pages xix-xxi) and the “Introduction: Genealogy and Titles of the Female Poet” (pages 1-14) are indispensable reading. For those with time to savor these poems, which are prefaced by interesting and informative headnotes, a very wide range of material awaits.

- \*\*\* MANN, Susan and Yu-Yin CHENG, eds. *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

This anthology gives access to primary source readings not previously available in English translation. The instructor pressed for time should concentrate on the “Editors’ Introduction” and the “Guide for Students and Teachers” (pages 1-15). Those with more leisure to browse through the different texts, written by men as well as women, and the extensive bibliography will make their own discoveries.

- \*\*\* WIDMER, Ellen and Kang-i Sun CHANG, eds. *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

An excellent collection of scholarly essays, including several treatments of *The Story of the Stone* and a consideration of the role of the courtesan as artist in the seventeenth century.

## 5C. Student Readings

- GU Ruopu. “When I Hired a Teacher to Instruct the Girls, Someone Ridiculed Me, So as a Joke I have Written This Retort to Explain Matters.” Translated by Maureen ROBERTSON. In *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*, edited by Kang-i Sun CHANG and Haun SAUSSY. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. Pages 309-310.
- GU Ruopu. “Letter to My Sons.” Translated by Dorothy KO. In *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, edited by Susan MANN and Yu-Yin CHENG. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Pages 151-52.

## 5D. Student Activity

Ask students to compare and contrast the values associated with daughters and with sons. Educated by her own family when she was girl, then widowed at a relatively early age, Gu was further instructed in classical learning by her father-in-law so that she could prepare her two sons to qualify for the civil service. Here are some questions that one might pose:

- How does Gu justify educating daughters when she is scolded for doing so?
- The Four Virtues are “respectful speech, chaste conduct, proper women’s work, and modest demeanor” (Chang and Saussy, p. 310). “The Three Obediences” are to one’s father, one’s husband, and one’s oldest son (p. 311). How fully does Gu work within the limits set by these ideas?
- What is remarkable about Gu’s decision to divide the family wealth while she was still young and healthy? How would you describe her self-presentation in this letter? Does she feel sorry for herself? Do you think she is angry?
- What might be Gu’s motives for writing a letter to her sons? Why was it necessary to put her ideas down on paper? Compare her motives for letter-writing with those of Madame de SEVIGNE. [Madame de SEVIGNE, who became a chronicler of Parisian society in the age of Louis XIV, wrote sketches of court life for her daughter who had moved to a distant place.]
- Gu disdains women “who cultivate appearances—they are only pretty dresses.” How would you compare Mary WOLLSTONECRAFT’s attitude toward women who are only taught to please?
  - See Chapters 2-3, “The Prevailing Opinion of Sexual Character” and “The Same Subject Continued” in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988). On page 29 of this edition, deploring the lack of education provided to women in an age of revolutionary change, Wollstonecraft compares the lot of pampered English women to that of women raised in a “seraglio” and on page 40 those “cramped with worse than Chinese bands.” These references could prompt a discussion of Orientalism, in many ways a product of the Western Enlightenment that shaped Wollstonecraft’s understanding of the world.
- If you have read CAO Xueqin’s *The Story of the Stone* (see “Further Reading” section), compare and contrast the treatment of poetry and intellectual attainment among the young women in the Garden with GU Ruopu’s attitude toward such accomplishments in her poem about her daughters.
  - Chapters 48-50 of Hawkes’ translation (in Volume 2), which recount a series of poetry competitions among the young ladies, would provide a particularly apt comparison to “The Sliding Screen in the Back of the Hall” in *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*.

## 5E. Comparative Opportunities

Opportunities for cross-cultural comparisons here include the work of Sor Juana de la Cruz (1648-1695), Madame de SABLE (1599-1678), Madame de SEVIGNE (1626-1696), and Mary WOLLSTONECRAFT (1759-1797). In her *Reply to Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (1691) Sor Juana, a Mexican nun, wrote an astonishing defense of a woman's right to pursue the life of an intellectual. Madame de SABLE is a representative of the brilliant salonieres of seventeenth-century France; not only did she entertain the intellectual luminaries of her era, she also composed sententious maxims that encapsulated truths about human behavior. Her contemporary, Madame de SEVIGNE, is best known for her witty letters. Mary WOLLSTONECRAFT (1759-97), the great English feminist, wrote novels, travel diaries, and compiled anthologies of readings for children. Her most influential work, however, is *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a response to a plan drawn up by Talleyrand in 1791, in the optimistic early days of the French Revolution, that excluded women from universal public education.

Sor Juana's *Reply to Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (1691), an apologia for a woman of intellect, or excerpts from Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), would be effective texts for use alongside Gu's work. The emphasis here is on the education of women. As we move closer to the modern day, we see women taking intellectual control of their own destinies; their attachments to men matter less and their social engagement with each other counts for more.

Intra-cultural comparisons may be drawn with *The Story of the Stone* (also known as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*) published in 1791, a novel by a Chinese man, CAO Xueqin, with an extraordinary sensitivity to the experience of talented women. Students who have read portions of this book might be asked to write a paper comparing the feverish poetic sensibility of LIN Daiyu (a fictional creation) with the sober, self-effacing strategies adopted by GU Ruopu, a real woman who lived around the time in which Cao's narrative is set (he lived from 1715-1763, and writes—like Proust—about the period of his childhood).

## 6. Further Reading

### 6A. Section I: Selections from the *Shijing*

- EBREY, Patricia Buckley. *Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China: A Social History of Writing about Rites*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

An authoritative source for insights into marriage customs in early Chinese history.

- FRANKEL, Hans H. *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

Frankel chooses a variety of poems, including several from the *Classic of Poetry*; his general comments on stanza and imagery in these texts may be applied to poems like

those mentioned above. See particularly pages 6-7, 50-53, 179-82. Frankel notes that the “frank eroticism of these charming songs was a matter of acute embarrassment to the Confucian scholars from Han times on” (p. 51): throughout, he urges the reader to respond to the text without too much concern about existing critical traditions.

#### 6B. Section II: Selections from Heian and Kamakura Women’s Writing

- ACKROYD, Joyce. “Women in Feudal Japan.” *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* 7 (1959): 31-68.

A classic essay that describes the deteriorating status of women after the Heian period.

- MORRIS, Mark. “Waka and Form, Waka and History.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 46, no. 2 (1986): 551-610.

For a different approach to the *Kokinshu*, this brilliant essay ranges across cultures, commenting on translation and the insights made available by a variety of classical and contemporary critical and theoretical discourses.

- WAKITA, Haruko. Introduction and translation by Suzanne GAY. “Marriage and Property in Premodern Japan From the Perspective of Women’s History.” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 10, no.1 (1984): 73-99.

The introduction discusses the uses of literature as source material for historical understanding.

#### 6C. Section III: Selections from the Work of GU Ruopu

- CAO, Xueqin (TS’ AO Hsueh-ch’in). *The Story of the Stone*. Trans. David HAWKES and John MINFORD. 5 vols. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1973-86.
- KO, Dorothy. *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.
- ROBERTSON, Maureen. “Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject.” *Late Imperial China* 13, no. 1 (1992): 63-110.
- WIDMER, Ellen. “The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China.” *Late Imperial China* 10, no. 2 (1989): 1-43.
- <http://home.infionline.net/~ddisse/sable.html>

A site describing the role of Madame de SABLE in the French salons of the seventeenth century that includes samples of her maxims.

- <http://europeanhistory.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http%3A%2F%2Femployees.csbsju.edu%2Ffewengler%2Fsevigne.htm>

A site that offers excerpts from several letters written by Madame de SEVIGNE to her daughter.

- <http://home.infionline.net/~ddisse/sevigne.html>

Another informative site with links for further study of Madame de SEVIGNE.

- TANCOCK, Leonard W. *Madame de Sevigne: Selected Letters*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1982.

A well-translated selection of letters to family and friends; perhaps the most famous of these is dated 15 December 1670. In this masterpiece of courtly gossip, Madame de SEVIGNE laughingly announces the forthcoming nuptials of an unlikely pair of lovers.