

Combing the Past: Gender, Sexuality and Intergenerational Connections among Women in Zhang Mei's "A Record"

Sally McWilliams

Department of English

Montclair State University

exeasmail@columbia.edu

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1. Themes and Goals

The purpose of this unit on ZHANG Mei's short story "A Record" is to explore the relationship between contemporary urban Chinese women and their predecessors by focusing on issues of representation, gender, sexuality, and female autonomy. The unit presents materials and study questions about the construction of Chinese women's subjectivity, the significance of women's history, and the transnational circulation of representations of Chinese women. While offering background information on the practice of marriage resistance by women in China, this unit also helps us understand the complexities of gender and sexual politics. Such an analysis looks closely at the impact of gender and sexuality on contemporary women's lives, intergenerational connections among women, and the production of knowledge which forms the basis of women's literary and cultural histories.

In "A Record", a young woman (the narrator) accompanies a male writer and a male film director on a day trip to Shunde County in Guangdong Province to interview some of the last surviving "self-wedded women" for a film the two men are developing. "Self-wedded" refers to a form of marriage resistance where women vowed in a ceremony to remain unmarried. Many self-wedded women lived together in communities in Southeastern China and were economically self-sufficient, often earning their living in the region's silk industry. (See part D of the Instructor's Introduction for more on self-wedded women and other marriage resistance practices.)

"A Record" is neither a sociological study nor an historical account about self-wedded women and their role in women's history. Rather, the story presents the reader with questions about how these women are to be represented, remembered, and reintegrated into contemporary women's narratives. The story allows students to consider the ways in which gender is constructed in China and elsewhere.

This unit will help students begin to think critically about gender, women's history, and the dissemination of women's images and narratives locally, nationally, and transnationally and to engage with such questions as: What ideal norms are imposed upon Chinese women, historically and currently? How does the story present the practices that inscribe gender and sexuality into women's lives and onto their bodies? In what way do the narrator's self-perceptions and those of the self-wedded women overlap and contradict each other? What might this story mean to contemporary Chinese women?

2. Audience and Uses

This short story is suitable for inclusion in courses dealing with contemporary Chinese women, gender representation, globalization of women's images, and Chinese women's history. It is best suited to sophomore or junior level undergraduates and is suitable for students with little or no previous exposure to Chinese literature. The ideal audience would have some experience in critical literary analysis.

The short story could be useful in a wide variety of courses, including but not limited to:

- Contemporary Women Writers
- Modern Comparative Short Fiction
- The International Short Story
- Gender and Sexuality in Literature
- Gender and Images of Women
- Literature and Women's History
- East Asian Women's History
- Gender in East Asia
- Feminist Approaches to International Literatures

This unit was originally designed to cover two 55-minute class sessions. The first session could be devoted to an introductory discussion of women in China using the Li, Ono, and possibly Gallagher readings. "A Record" would then be covered in the second session. Additional readings and a film recommendation are also provided if the instructor wishes to use this material in more class sessions."

3. Instructor's Introduction

A. Key Points

Students should come away from the study of this story having gained insight into the following issues:

- *The construction of Chinese female subjectivity and women's history*

The term "subjectivity" is used here in the post-structuralist sense — emphasis is placed on the process of constructing an identity (in this case a gendered identity) rather than assuming that a woman's identity pre-exists the experiences she has. In ZHANG Mei's story, the narrator asks what it means to be a modern Chinese woman; her act of

questioning helps students begin to understand how gender and sexuality are shaped by historical and cultural contexts.

- *Women's resistance to patriarchal expectations and the forms of such resistance.*

One of the major issues presented by the story is the historical importance of self-wedded women. Using this focus, the story examines the question of women's autonomy and agency. The contemporary narrator looks at how earlier women demonstrated independence and what the repercussions of this are for today's young Chinese women. For example, the narrator sees that she is being used by the writer and director to get the inside story on self-wedded women's sexual lives. In recognizing her role in the film project, the narrator begins to reflect on women's autonomy in same-sex relationships and the control men attempt to exert over women's lives. Her examination prompts her to start questioning the types of freedom she and her contemporary peers actually have. Her comparative analysis leads her to the subject of women's history. The narrator struggles to explain the need for connections between the older women and the current generation.

- *Narrative techniques that foreground the interpretive problem of how we produce knowledge about women's experiences.*

The story focuses on how visual and written representations of women are constructed and how these representations circulate. The story draws upon a variety of types of texts to attempt to explain the history of the self-wedded women; these depictions range from academic articles to popular cultural representations of the women's lives. By using a critically self-conscious narrator the story allows readers to examine the process through which certain historical information is granted value and importance, and likewise which material and experiences are marginalized. The author asks readers to think carefully about the ways in which women's history (including literary history) has been constructed and deployed; we must also consider who gains from such actions.

Students may be tempted to read the short story as simply a condemnation of films that objectify Chinese women, especially women who have marked themselves in contradistinction to mainstream society (in the case of the self-wedded women in the story). They may also be perplexed by the narrator's relationship to the self-wedded women she meets and to their stories. It is exactly these two points that create the most interesting and productive sites for discussion. Through discussion students may begin to see how the narrator is complicit at points in the exploitation of these women and at the same time uneasy with the question of how these women's lives and experiences can be seen as intersecting with her own in terms of constructing a Chinese women's history and a sense of Chinese female subjectivity. The instructor may also want to highlight the intertextuality of the story. Discussion about how the employment of multiple types of texts (ranging from the academic to pop culture) shapes our understanding of China, Chinese women, and gender is crucial to a full exploration of the story.

B. “A Record” and Feminist Theory

Reading Chinese women’s literature can benefit from a feminist theoretical framework for discussions. The work of LI Yu-ning and Dorothy KO (see Instructor Readings) is helpful in presenting this framework. Distinctions need to be made between hardship and female oppression in women’s lives. LI Yu-ning writes that “hardship cannot be uncritically equated with oppression.” Use this quote to introduce students to the idea that we should not view all women in China as exclusively victims of a patriarchal society. This idea is as true for earlier historical periods as it is for contemporary China. One example is found in the *sancong*, the “three obediences” (or “Thrice Following” in Ko’s language) for women. According to the “three obediences,” a woman follows her father and elder brother in her youth; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband dies, she follows her son. This set of views deprived a woman of her legal and formal social identity, but as Ko points out, not her subjectivity. What Ko means by this is that the *sancong* presents itself as a universalizing view of women when in fact women from different economic backgrounds, classes, locales, and ages had varying degrees of autonomy and opportunity within the framework of this gender/sex system. To that end we must also consider women in their differences as well as their similarities. [Note: The instructor might want to refer to Mary GALLAGHER’s essay, “Women and Gender,” (see Student Readings) to underscore this point.]

Although Ko’s work is focused on the seventeenth century, her theoretical insights can help us to think in a new way about contemporary Chinese women by moving us away from a dichotomous model of an oppressive patriarchy and victimized women. Ko theorizes that there are three spheres of shifting, interconnecting and/or diverging realities with which women engage: 1) theory or the ideal norms, 2) practice, and 3) self-perceptions. Here are some ideas we might think about as we read contemporary Chinese fiction: How is each of these three spheres shaped by historical events? In turn, how do they shape historical events? How do they impact cultural and social shifts in perceptions/attitudes about women? How do the narrative strategies reflect and/or construct representations of Chinese women’s subjectivities in concert with or in contradiction to these three spheres?

C. Women in China and Women’s Writing

To help students negotiate the Chinese literary and social context of the assigned narratives, assign LI Ziyun’s essay “Women’s Consciousness and Women’s Writing” (see Student Readings) before assigning “The Record.” This article discusses women’s writings from the early years of the twentieth century to the late 1980s. The instructor may also want to read Lydia LIU’s essay, “Invention and Intervention: The Making of a Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature” (see Instructor Readings), as it helps to set up the discussion of feminist literary history as an important historical project.

Prior to reading ZHANG Mei’s short story, the instructor may want to refer to Gallagher’s essay “Women and Gender” (see Student Readings) to guide a discussion of women’s oppression in China (familial, societal, and cultural). Likewise, the article is useful to discuss how as readers we must avoid imposing our expectations that all Chinese women’s literature will of necessity be a literature of resistance. If when we read we see the narrative working out some form of

resistance, then we must try to see what particular forms of power and domination are being resisted within the text. The optional video, *Nu Shu: A Hidden Language of Women In China* (see Student Readings), aids in this discussion of the complex representations of women's hardship, domination, and survival in the face of adversity. This video, along with excerpts of *nu shu* poetry (found in the appendix to Silber's essay, "From Daughter to Daughter-in-Law in the Women's Script of Southern Hunan"; see Instructor Readings), brings to light some of the ways in which women's writing was both acceptable within the sphere of marriage while also challenging the notion that women were inferior to men. This background information and analysis prepares students for the complex set of issues presented in ZHANG Mei's "A Record."

D. Marriage Resistance in China

To enhance students' comprehension of "A Record" it would be helpful to give them additional information on the practices of marriage resistance. The phenomena of marriage resistance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries challenges stereotypical perceptions of women's role in Chinese society and attitudes towards marriage. Marjorie TOPLEY's article, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung" (see Instructor Readings) argues that such resistance was limited to a relatively small geographical area of the Canton delta where sericulture was the prominent industry. The silk industry was labor intensive, and female labor was thus necessary beyond the confines of the home. For this reason, Topley reports that bound feet and female infanticide were rare in this area. The silk industry enabled economic independence for some women and thus the option of resisting typical marriage practices. According to Topley, the decision to resist marriage was not necessarily a rebellious act on the part of women, but for financial reasons was often supported by the women's family and community.

Topley identifies two primary patterns of marriage resistance. Some women opted to completely resist marriage and would take vows in a ceremony that they would remain unmarried, becoming self-wedded women (the term used in ZHANG Mei's short story). These women often lived communally with others who had taken the same vows and were economically self-sufficient. They were often referred to as "women who dress their own hair" (*zishunü*) because of the rituals during their vow ceremony. Other women, known as "women who do not go down to the family" (*buluojia*), did marry, but they rejected patrilocal marriage and refused to live with their husbands after the marriage ceremony (Zhang refers to these women as "absentee wives"). The woman would often remain financially responsible for her husband's family and would provide for the upkeep of his concubine. Topley also discusses lesbian relationships that developed among some women who participated in a marriage-like ceremony, after which the couple would cohabitate. These same-sex relationships and communities might be understood as both complicit in the region's marriage politics and resistant to direct male control and organization. It is this complexity that drives ZHANG Mei's story. The instructor might want to read Rubie S. WATSON's essay (see Instructor Readings) for a more nuanced comparison of marriage resistance practices and their origins and motivations.

4. Instructor Readings

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

*** KO, Dorothy. "Introduction: Gender and the Politics of Chinese History." In *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994. Pages 1-26.

Ko's introduction presents a three-part theoretical model that displaces the outdated dichotomous model that places women as always victims of men and patriarchal institutions, thereby refusing women any form of subjectivity or agency.

*** LI, Yu-ning. "Historical Roots of Changes in Women's Status in Modern China." In *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes*, edited by LI Yu-ning. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1992. Pages 102-122.

Most of the essays in this collection were written in the 1930s and 40s with a couple more contemporary pieces. This essay, first published in 1982, focuses on historical changes for women and their status by examining how aspects of traditional culture function as part of the changes confronting modern women. This essay makes a useful distinction between socioeconomic hardship and patriarchal oppression.

** LIU, Lydia H. "Invention and Intervention: The Making of a Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature." In *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, edited by Susan BROWNELL and Jeffrey N. WASSERSTROM. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Pages 149-174.

In this essay Liu argues that a Chinese female tradition of literature is a historically-bound project. She investigates how three writers — DING Ling, ZHANG Jie, and WANG Anyi — each contributed to the construction of that tradition as they wrote of women's subjectivity, writing, and gender. Liu discusses the ambivalent feelings women writers have about the term feminism and distinguishes between the meaning of gender difference in China and the West. Her final argument is that such a tradition is both a necessary invention and intervention in male-dominated literary traditions.

** SIEBER, Patricia. "Introduction." In *Red Is Not the Only Color: Contemporary Chinese Fiction on Love and Sex between Women, Collected Stories*, edited by Patricia SIEBER. Lanham, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. Pages 1-35.

Sieber provides solid historical background on the types of same-sex relationships, friendships and associations in contemporary China. Sieber links this background material to the way writers have used same-sex women's relationships to interrogate a variety of issues ranging from global commercialization to sexual desire, from self-realization to historical memory. She also provides brief discussions of the stories and

short author biographical sketches which help to contextualize ZHANG Mei and her short story within the larger realm of Chinese women writers and their fiction.

**SILBER, Cathy. "From Daughter to Daughter-in-Law in the Women's Script of Southern Hunan." In *Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State*, edited by Christina K. GILMARTIN, Gail HERSHATTER, et. al. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. Pages 47-68.

This essay is an excellent discussion of the social and political complexities of *nu shu*, a writing system used exclusively by women in rural Hunan province, and the relationships among the women who used this writing system, their families, and their communities. Silber discusses the content of these women's writings and gives examples of it in the appendix to the essay.

**TOPLEY, Marjorie. "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung." in *Women in Chinese Society*, edited by Margery WOLF and Roxane WITKE. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975. Pages 67-88.

The phenomenon of marriage resistance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries challenges stereotypical perceptions of women's role in Chinese society and attitudes towards marriage. Topley argues that marriage resistance was limited to a relatively small geographical area of the Canton delta where silk production was the prominent industry. She identifies two primary patterns of marriage resistance: "women who dress their own hair" (*zishunü*) because of the rituals during their vow ceremony; and "women who do not go down to the family" (*buluojia*), did marry, but they rejected patrilocal marriage and refused to live with their husbands after the marriage ceremony. She analyzes both the socially resistant and complicit features of such relationships.

*WATSON, Rubie S. "Girls' Houses and Working Women: Expressive Culture in the Pearl River Delta, 1900-41." In *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude and Escape*, edited by Maria JASCHOK and Suzanne MIERS. London: Zed Books Ltd, 1994. Pages 25-44.

This essay compares the work of scholars who have studied women's labor and culture in the Pearl River Delta during the early years of the twentieth century. Watson presents the complexities in the practices of marriage resistance and the scholars' varying viewpoints on reasons for these practices. She foregrounds the hybrid nature of the women's practices as they combine longstanding cultural practices with changes from the local silk production industrial culture. It is a good companion piece to Topley's essay.

5. Student Readings

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

*** ZHANG, Mei. "A Record." Translated by Patricia SIEBER. In *Red Is Not the Only Color: Contemporary Chinese Fiction on Love and Sex between Women, Collected Stories*, edited by Patricia SIEBER. Lanham, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. Pages 73-91.

Written in 1995, this short story examines contemporary Chinese urban women's autonomy through the trope of film production. The young female narrator of "A Record" finds herself enmeshed not only in a film project about the self-wedded women of Shunde County, but also in a critical re-examination of the past through these women's lives and narratives. The story takes up issues of global capitalism, gender and sexuality, and women's literary and material history.

*** LI, Ziyun. "Women's Consciousness and Women's Writing." Translated by ZHU Hong. In *Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State*, edited by Christina GILMARTIN, Gail HERSHATTER, Lisa ROFEL and Tyrene WHITE. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. Pages 299-317.

This essay gives an overview of what Chinese women were writing about and against during the twentieth century. It is accessible for students and can be used as general classroom background reading material.

*** ONO, Kazuko. *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950*. Edited by Joshua A. FOGEL. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989. Pages 121-124.

This brief excerpt from Ono's chapter on women workers gives an instructive overview of the connection between the economics of the silk reeling industry and the social, sexual economy of the women who worked within that industry. Women experienced greater freedom and autonomy in refusing dominant marriage practices through the establishment of houses for unmarried women, the creation of same-sex personal relationships, and the practice of marriage resistance.

** GALLAGHER, Mary. "Women and Gender." In *An Introduction to Chinese Culture through the Family*, edited by Howard GISKIN and Bettye S. WALSH. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001. Pages 89-105.

For students without a background in Chinese history, this essay provides a clearly written discussion of some of the ideological and social factors shaping women's lives. Gallagher presents a comparison between so-called traditional China and modern China and how the respective timeframes impacted women. She discusses how women were able to resist attempts to make them feel inferior to men within societal hierarchies.

Although the article makes some broad generalizations, it also reminds readers that women's experiences varied both in and across temporal contexts and spaces.

* *Nu Shu: A Hidden Language of Women in China*. Directed by Yue-Qing YANG. Women Make Movies, 1999. Videocassette. Distributed by Women Make Movies. (<http://www.wmm.com>; Purchase price = \$250, Rental = \$75)

A feminist filmmaker journeys into a rural Chinese province to locate women who either used or knew of the use of a women's language, *nu shu*. The video narrates the linguistic and cultural story of *nu shu* and of its practitioners as female resisters to Confucian beliefs and heterosexual marital patterns. The film presents the practice between certain women of becoming "sworn sisters" (*laotong*) and the use of *nu shu* to build bonds between them before and just after marriage. This cultural studies approach to women's history is a necessary component to understanding the complex and oftentimes contradictory manifestations of women's resistance to patriarchal domination.

* ZHANG, Jie. "Love Must Not Be Forgotten." Translated by Gladys YANG. In *Love Must Not Be Forgotten*. San Francisco: China Books & Periodicals, 1986. Pages 1-13. (Alternate version: Translated by William CRAWFORD. In *Roses and Thorns: The Second Blooming of the Hundred Flowers in Chinese Fiction, 1979-80*, edited by Perry LINK. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. Pages 244-260.)

A powerful narrative in which a young woman contemplates her future in light of her mother's silenced past. Refusing to burn her mother's diary upon her death, the daughter uses the diary as a site of speculation about love, romance, deferred desire, marriage, and women's destinies. This short story broke away from its socialist realist predecessors to reinvigorate fiction with attention to emotions, and more specifically, love. The story is also a meditation on the significance of reading, writing, and critical interpretation with an emphasis on women's rewriting of male-authored texts.

If you choose to include "Love Must Not Be Forgotten," assign it before students read "A Record." This story focuses on the rewriting of women's lives through female-authored texts. In discussing not only the content of the story but also how the author broke with prevailing literary tradition, students may come to understand that women writers were voices for innovative representations of women's lives, experiences, and narrative languages. ZHANG Jie's fiction forms a useful backdrop for ZHANG Mei's "A Record" by emphasizing the process of gender construction, the formation of a women's literary tradition, and the significance of intergenerational female memory — all topics addressed in "A Record."

6. Discussion Questions

The following study questions can be used for in-class discussion or can form the basis of a 2-3 page writing assignment.

- The narrator has been invited to help the scriptwriter and the director in interviewing the self-wedded women of Shunde County. Describe her uneasiness with her role in this project. Be sure to indicate how the men view the self-wedded women and the film project — does the narrator share their views? If not, why not?
- Look at the way the narrator describes herself and how she describes the self-wedded women. How do past and present play out in these descriptions?
- Via the narrator's self-conscious telling, the story is neither an ethnographic documentary nor an exoticizing romance of the "other" woman; instead, it asks us to question the processes that construct and represent Chinese female subjectivity and Chinese women's history. Give examples where the narrator highlights or questions the processes that construct gender, sexual histories, and women's history. Also consider how the references to multiple depictions of the women (e.g., academic articles, TV shows, karaoke song lyrics, folk songs) within the narrative itself functions to problematize the idea of any "one" right representation.
- The narrator attempts to bridge time and space by drawing connections between the self-wedded women and contemporary women (see passages on pages 79 and 83). What are we to understand by the fact that she always stops short in her comparisons?
- Discuss the title of the story in relation to the issues of female autonomy, sexual politics, historiography, global capitalism, and filmmaking.
- What might be some provocative ways of putting this story into a dialogue with ZHANG Jie's story "Love Must Not Be Forgotten"?

7. Further Reading

McLAREN, Anne. "Women's Voices and Textuality: Chastity and Abduction in Chinese *Nüshu* Writing," *Modern China* 22, no. 4 (1996): 382-416.

PAN, Lynn. "Some of the Women." In *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: A History of the Chinese Diaspora*. New York: Kodansha International, 1994. Pages 191-204.

SIU, Helen F. "Where Were the Women? Rethinking Marriage Resistance and Regional Culture in South China," *Late Imperial China* 11, no. 2 (December 1990): 32-62.

STOCKARD, Janice E. *Daughters of the Canton Delta: Marriage Patterns and Economic Strategies in South China, 1860-1930*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989.

ZHANG, Zhen. "The World Map of Haunting Dreams: Reading Post-1989 Chinese Women's Diaspora Writings." In *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, edited by Mayfair Mei-Hui YANG. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Pages 308-335.

———. "Mediating Time: The 'Rice Bowl of Youth' in Fin de Siecle Urban China." In *Globalization*, edited by Arjun APPADURAI. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. Pages 131-154.