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## "Echo and Shadow": Images of Women in Traditional China

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The topic, "women in traditional China," is both an obvious — and a unlikely — subject of inquiry. Images of bound feet, stalwart mothers, seductive fox fairies, evil temptresses, ill-fated wives, exemplary spouses, women warriors — all these come readily to mind. So much is obvious and familiar. Yet, in another sense, the exploration of women in traditional China is, at the same time, a surprising, perhaps even futile, inquiry, when one recognizes the co-opted nature of the evidence and the predominantly male voice in which the historical testimony is given. Is a true picture of women in traditional China accessible in the historical record, when they have been, for most of China's long history, illiterate; when, with very few exceptions, women have been unable to record their own thoughts and feelings? To the predominantly male Chinese mentality, these concerns might seem "marginalized," off-centered, somewhat trivialized, belonging more to the exotica rather than the esoterica of Chinese civilization, the periphery rather than the inner core of Chinese tradition. There are, to be sure, compilations of the lives of women, the most famous being the *Lie Nü Juan* 列女傳, by Liu Xiang 劉向, a scholar of the 1st

century B. C. But this text was part of the Confucian *paideuma*, prepared by a scholar to inculcate the proper values in women: "For centuries," one commentator has written, "it was customary to place the *Lie Nü Juan* in the hands of all Chinese ladies who could read for the examples of good or bad conduct it afforded" (O'Hara, 9).

The written testimony from individual women — certainly by contrast to the voluminous writings of men — is meager indeed. There are a few poets, a historian, courtesans, concubines, even an empress or two. Of the some 2,300 poets represented in the *Complete Tang Poems*, for example, about 130 were women; of the more than 50,000 poems in that anthology, 600 were written by women. But even this relatively slender output is couched in a literary language that was indisputably the instrument of the male elite; there is in the medium of expression, the sentiment, the rhetoric, the values, a decisively bias in favor of a male, a specifically patriarchal, Confucian ethos.

This linguistic disenfranchisement of women, though commonplace in world history, is by no means inevitable. Take, for example, China's neighbor, Japan, which shares the same Confucian roots — even,

once upon a time, the same language. In the Heian period, a thousand years ago, the male elite in Japan wrote in Chinese; the native colloquial was deemed inadequate to literary expression, fit for use only by women. Yet this very denigrated colloquial was the language in which a woman, Murasaki Shikibu, produced *The Tale of Genji*, the greatest classic in Japanese literature. Although there may be evidence of local languages and dialects specifically used by women, no exclusively female discourse entered the canon.

So, if we explore the topic of women in traditional China, our first insight is reflexive, self-conscious, and reflective: much of our testimony will be tintured by male bias, even when it is written by women. My own generic perspective — both male and acculturatedly Western — no doubt augments the danger of bias. In these speculations, my search for "the significant other" in Chinese history will be "deconstructionist": it will examine the significance of male testimony — even when that testimony is written by women — against its own professed meaning; it will try to tease out the ironies of the self-serving male ideology in Chinese images of women. In the absence of direct and undistorted testimony from the female, one must rely perforce on mostly biased if not hostile male witnesses; one needs to be resourceful, to use indirections to find directions out, to cross-examine the self to discover the other. What follows are ruminations on four women in Chinese history: a literatus-scholar-historian; a legendary folk heroine; an empress; and a concubine of the imperial court.

Ban Zhao, the most eminent women

scholar in Chinese history, and one of the most accomplished literati of her generation, lived in the Later Han Dynasty; it is significant that, while we know the dates when her two brothers were born and when they died, we cannot pinpoint with confidence exactly when she was born, nor when she died; her birth occurred somewhere between 45-51 A.D., her death somewhere between 114-120 A.D.<sup>1</sup> She descended from distinguished pedigree: she had an uncle who was an authority on the texts of Laozi and Zhuangzi; an aunt who was appointed imperial concubine; a father who was a strict Confucian; twin brothers, one, Ban Gu, a court historian, the other, Ban Chao, a decorated general. Ban Zhao was fortunate that her father was an orthodox Confucian scholar except when it came to education: he taught his daughter to read and write, along with her brothers. So it was that, when her brother, Ban Gu, died in 92 A.D., she was chosen to complete the *Han Shu*. "The History of the Han Dynasty," to which she contributed two new sections, the "Eight Tables" and the "Treatise on Astronomy." Ban Zhao also advised the Empress Deng, who became regent of the infant heir apparent upon the death of the Emperor Ho in 105 A.D. and continued to exercise power even after the boy died and was succeeded by a thirteen-year-old cousin. The Empress Deng died in 121 A.D. (Swann, 43).

What particularly attracts our attention today are Ban Zhao's instructions for a woman's ordinary way of life, her "Lessons for Women," which she composed for her daughters. This is a remarkable document, not only because it was written by a woman, but because it was addressed to women —

reflecting the not obvious faith that women would be able to read it: we know her daughters were accomplished in letters because Ban Zhao specifically enjoins each of her daughters to write out her own copy (Swann, 83). In this treatise of seven sections, Ban Zhao deals with "Humility," "Husband and Wife," "Respect and Caution," "Womanly Qualifications," "Whole-hearted Devotion," "Implicit Obedience," and "Harmony with Younger Brothers- and Sisters-in-law" (Swann, 83-88). Even the focus of these subjects reflect a view of woman that sees her as accommodating rather than assertive, responsive rather than declarative. She counsels implicit obedience to her mother-in-law even when she is wrong; she praises the sacrifice of personal opinion in the act of obedience. In advising wives how to behave toward their mother-in-law, she quotes once from the "Pattern for Women," and provides a haunting image for women: "If a daughter-in-law... is like an echo and a shadow, how could one not appreciate her?" 婦如影響焉不可賞 (Hsieh, 63).

These depictions of women as secondary, shadow to substance, echo to voice will strike egalitarian sensibilities as highly prejudicial highly compromising. But Ban Zhao did not see any injustice in the relationship: "As *Yin* and *Yang* are not of the same nature, so man and woman have different characteristics," Ban Zhao writes, "The distinctive quality of *Yang* is rigidity; the function of *Yin* is yielding." But she does not view this, as so many earnest radicals might today, as representing the oppression or subjugation of women. Yielding may bespeak weakness and compliance on the surface, but it emanates from a largeness of

spirit, a strength of sacrifice. She adheres to the sayings of Mencius (III, II, 2:2): "Compliance is proper: that is the way of women" (以順爲正者，妾婦道也). For Ban Zhao, compliance does not so much reflect a timidity as a generosity of spirit: "Those who are steadfast in devotion know that they should stay in their proper places; those who are liberal and generous esteem others" (Swann, 85). The element most admired in *yin-yang* theory is water, which yields, yet remains obdurate; which conforms to the terrain, yet subtly and inexorably reshapes it; which is constant even when shifting with the tides. "What is more fluid, more yielding than water?" the Dao De Jing asks, "Yet back it comes again, wearing down the rigid strength / Which cannot yield to withstand it. / So it is that the strong are overcome by the weak, / The haughty by the humble" (#78; Bynner translation). Yielding is a virtue in Chinese: as it says in the *Analects* (4:13), in a passage Ban Zhao was fond of quoting: "If a ruler is able to govern his state properly by yielding to others, what difficulty will he have? If he is not able to govern properly by yielding to others, then how is he proper?"

Many of these admonitions of compliance for women would encounter no grounds for disagreement among the traditional Chinese male. But it would be wrong, I think, to assume that Ban Zhao is a woman totally oppressed by male ideology. Her ethic is not male dominance vs. female submissiveness; she sees male and female as part of a holistic concept, of complementarity halves, dependent on each other for their very being: "The Way of husband and wife is intimately connected with *Yin* and *Yang*, and relates the individual to gods and

ancestors. Truly it is the great principle of Heaven and Earth, and the great basis of human relationships" (Swann, 84). This is perhaps the major difference between Chinese notions of gender identity and those of feminist extremists: the Chinese see the *Yin* and the *Yang* as opposite but *equal*. The relationship between man and woman, particularly in marriage, manifests a familiar principle of Heaven and Earth. Proper relationships and the rites must be maintained. In a culture in which humbling oneself before others is the mark of a superior man, the humility, the modesty of women is not a shame. That Ban Zhao sees man and woman as equal is evinced by her attitude toward educations, which is to cultivate in persons of both sexes an understanding of the proper relationships and rites. Attacking the unequal access to education that was then traditional in China, and everywhere else, she asks: "Yet only to teach men and not to teach women, — is that not ignoring the essential relations between them?" (Swann, 84).<sup>2</sup> The neglect of women in education is, in her eyes, a failure to promulgate the dominant patriarchal conceptions of society.

Ban Zhao is instructive not merely as a woman who excelled in a system and a mindset that is predominantly biased toward the male: even as she accepts the male ideology, she follows it through to its logical end, and sees that the avenues of upward mobility, the means to power — education — must be universal, open to men and women. The so-called meritocratic examination system in China was, of course, nothing of the sort, when one considers that women were excluded by social convention, and the poor were precluded by economic

necessity. (They were both denied the opportunity for private education, unless they were, as in only exceptional cases, sponsored by rich patrons or unusually progressive parents).

The experience of reading Ban Zhao's memorials to the Empress Deng is uncanny, and presents a certain sense of parallax. The rhetoric is unmistakably correct: florid, deferential almost to the point of servility, her writing is very literary, familiar and expected in the formal writings of any male literatus. Yet, the parallax effect occurs when one realizes that the author is a woman, who may be doubly deferential — as a minister and as a woman. The rhetoric in her memorials are conventional for ministers addressing rulers, and adopt a deferential stance even to the degree of servility: "Because your servant has come to this conclusion," she writes at the end of a memorial, "she ventures at the risk of her life, and has exhausted her stupid self, in mind and in feelings. Although she herself knows that her words are not worth the consideration of Your Majesty, nevertheless they reveal the deep feeling of your servant, worm that she is." The height of elegance in traditional Chinese society, the apex of which was to reach the status of minister where one abased oneself before one's emperor. These self-flagellations cannot but appear excessive to Westerners. But to the Chinese, they are by no means unexceptional or remarkable.

The parallax factor lies in the fact that this memorial is addressed to a ruler who is, herself a woman, Empress Deng. From this one can deduce that the notion of *yin* is not literally feminine or exclusively female. A minister would assume the *yin* role to the

ruler's *yang* role; one is compliant whereas the other is assertive. In the course of China's history, there have been a number of Empresses, as well as Empress Regents, who received memorials from their ministers in language couched in tones of servility and submissiveness. These ministers were always male. (There is, to my knowledge, no instance of a female minister advising a male ruler.). The irony in the case of Ban Zhao is that she adopted the stance of a minister, a role normally restricted to men, and wrote as they would in a subservient posture. Yet, despite this ritual subservience, one cannot read these memorials without some sense of personal pride that she had mastered the *yin* role of minister, and that she was a woman who had proved herself — in her mastery of the literary rhetoric — every bit as elegantly subservient as a man.

The question of male chauvinism, which has troubled some male scholars as well as a host of female scholars in our time, haunts all presentations of Chinese culture to Western audiences. There is no question that the injustices committed against women in China have persisted over time, and are manifest in many forms — from foot-binding; to the grounds for divorce, so heavily favoring the husband; to the exclusion of women from the bureaucracy; to property laws and inheritance laws that are inevitably biased in a patriarchal society. These are too familiar to be rehearsed. But there are certain anomalies in this bleakly chauvinistic picture that cannot be ignored. On three occasions in China's history, a woman has been supreme ruler: Wu Zetian in the Tang Dynasty; Cixi in the late Qing period; and Jiang Qing in the 1960's. Most

historians would agree that the last two instances were disasters for China. (Contrast with this the history of Japan, whose very native colloquial developed out of the language used by women: there have been no rulers in Japan who have been women; indeed the very idea would be inconceivable.)

Wu Zetian (625-705) occupies a unique place in Chinese history. She is the only woman to reign as "emperor" (則天大聖皇帝), and not as "empress," in the capacity as regent, or empress dowager. She is the only woman to have established a claim to supreme authority in China in her own name. E. G. Pulleyblank has written: "Other women before and after Wu Tse-t'ien [Wu Zetian] exercised power as empresses dowager, ruling in the name of child emperors, but she was the only one in the whole recorded length of Chinese history who went beyond this and openly assumed the style and prerogatives of the imperial dignity for herself" (quoted in Guisso, vii).

Historians, both Chinese and Western, seem in general agreement that Wu Zetian was a capable ruler, and that the legitimacy of her reign was based, in large measure, on the allegiance of her subjects. "Having shared power with her husband for nearly three decades," Pulleyblank tells us, "she still had the reins of authority firmly in her grasp when he died and was unwilling to give them up. At the same time her proved competence in government made her acceptable to the majority of her subjects, whose support enabled her to dispose of such challenges as did arise." The reign of Empress Wu was no accident. Even entrenched male-chauvinistic Confucians seemed to accede to her claim, despite their

habitual disdain for a woman assuming the reins of power. "One of the most remarkable things about the picture we get of her from contemporary sources," a modern historian has written, "is the respect in which she was held by Confucian ministers who served under her, even when they disapproved in principle of her unorthodox occupancy of a position reserved for a member of the male sex" (Pulleyblank, quoted in Guisso, viii).

The Empress Wu was no surrogate male: her ambitions for women were manifest in her feminist tendencies; she actively sought the counsel of women advisors, including her youngest daughter, the Taiping princess; and — most audacious of all — she tried to found a new dynasty, and to perpetuate her own line on the throne of China. She sought to make her son reign as her successor, only if he used her surname, not her husband's. She was unwilling to be anyone else's echo, anyone else's shadow. In fact, she sought her own voice and determined to cast her own shadow. She reigned for nearly fifty years, first in concert with Tang Gaozong, and for the last fifteen years in her own right. She succeeded in achieving supreme power in her own life, but her hopes of establishing a matriarchal succession was thwarted by the entrenched patriarchal Confucian system.

The example of Empress Wu, depicted by hostile historians as a usurper, an imposture on the natural order of things, nevertheless belies the popular Confucian canard that women are by nature not fit to rule. Her reign, first as wife of Gaozong, then in her own right, was a prosperous period, providing a bridge from the martial and magisterial Taizong in the 7th century to

the brilliant Xuanzong in the 8th century. She reigned not as a man, though her authority was unquestioned, but as a woman; and she reigned as "emperor," as supreme ruler, and not as "empress," as spouse or mother of a reigning potentate. Her example by no means contradicts the generally male bias of traditional Chinese society; her access to power was, after all, through love and sexuality rather than via the examination system. Had she not been rescued by the Gaozong's principal wife from a convent to distract him from a rival, she would have languished for the remainder of her life in religious seclusion. As a concubine of the Emperor Taizong, upon his death in 749, she had been remanded to a convent, consigned to oblivion: dynastic laws strictly prohibited the concubines of a deceased emperor from re-entering the world. But despite these obstacles she managed to gain the respect of her Confucian male rivals. Even the consequent attempts by Confucian scholars to characterize her reign as immoral and shameful ring hollow before the face of her achievement in her time.

The popular judgment on Wu Zetian may be summarized, typically, in a set of aphorisms comparing her to the wife of Han Gaozu, Empress Lü, the virtuous but hapless spouse of the founder of the Han dynasty. Of Empress Lü, it is said she was 亂而不淫 ("disorganized but not licentious"); and of Empress Wu, the reverse was applied: she was 淫而不亂 ("Licentious but not disorganized"). Empress Wu's affairs, particularly her notorious liaison with a handsome peddler named Xue Huaiyi 薛懷義 at the age of sixty, and her amours with two ambitious and good-looking brothers of noble lineage, Zhang Changzong

張昌宗 and Zhang Yizhi 張易之, whom she took up with at the age of seventy-two, and with whom she consorted until her death, at age eighty. The interesting thing about these popular impressions is that they are inevitable with Empresses, but they are scarcely mentioned with male emperors. The male mentality will associate females with licentiousness and with incapacities, that any woman who departs from the norm is always worth notice. The woman who is not disorderly, according to this mindset, is extraordinary, because as most men know, or seem to believe, women are by nature disheveled in their thinking, capricious, mercurial. On the other hand, it is the essence of women to be lustful and licentious (here, the Chinese notion of women contrasts with medieval Western ideals of the innate chastity of women). Women are the source of sexual disorientation: they are the engines of the destruction of men.

The interesting dimension of these characterizations is the implicit assumption that male emperors are neither licentious and

lewd or disorderly. The annals are full of emperors whose appetite for pleasure knew no bounds; there are few that were known for their administrative skills. Even Wu Zetian's famous grandson, Tang Hsüanzong, "the Brilliant Emperor," whose final years were both *luan* 亂 "disorganized" and *yin* 淫 "licentious." It appears that popular judgments are more indulgent on males than on females. The significance of these distortions on the genderbias of the historical perspective is obvious.

If Ban Zhao was a "fill-in" for her brother, Ban Gu, in the completion of the *Han Shu* ("The History of the Han Dynasty"), and Wu Zhao was the surrogate for the enfeebled Emperor Tang Gaozong during his life, and his replacement after his death, then perhaps the most famous stand-in for a man is the legendary Mu-lan, the model of the "woman warrior." The earliest account of the story of Mu-lan does not offer her surname, but she is said to have lived at the time of the Northern Wei (386-534). Let me share with you the *yuefu* version of the story:

### The Ballad of Mu-lan<sup>3</sup>

Heaving a sigh and then another sigh,  
 Mu-lan was sitting weaving at her door.  
 You could not hear the noise of loom and shuttle,  
 But only the sound of the girl lamenting.  
 'O lady, are you thinking of your love  
 O lady, are you brooding on your love?'  
 'Indeed, I have no love at all to think of,  
 Indeed, I have no love at all to brood on.  
 But then last night I read the battle-roll,  
 The Khan is calling up a mighty levy.  
 The battle roll was written on twelve scrolls,  
 And every scroll carried my father's name.

My father has no grown-up son at all,  
 And I myself have got no elder brother.  
 I want to buy a saddle and a horse,  
 To take my father's place in the expedition,  
 In the eastern market she bought a noble horse,  
 In the western market bought a blanket and saddle.  
 In the souther market bought a bridle and reins,  
 In the northern market bought a long whip.  
 At break of day she took leave of her father and mother,  
 At evening camped on the banks of the Yellow River.  
 She did not hear her father and mother calling for their daughter,  
 She only heard the Yellow River's flowing waters murmuring.  
 At break of day she left the Yellow River,  
 At dusk she came to the edge of the Black Hills.  
 She did not hear her father and mother calling for their daughter,  
 She only heard the nomad horses whinnying on the hills of Yen.  
 Ten thousand leagues she rode on missions of war,  
 Passes and mountains she crossed like a bird on the wing.  
 On the northern wind came the sound of the sentry's drum.  
 The wintry light glinted upon her armour.  
 After a hundred battles the general was killed,  
 Ten years passed by and the warriors could go home.  
 When she came back she was summoned by the Son of Heaven,  
 The Son of Heaven was seated in the Hall of Light.  
 For her brave deeds she was raised up full twelve ranks,  
 And given a reward of one hundred thousand cash.  
 The Khan asked her to state just what she wanted.  
 'Oh, I do not want to be a court official.  
 But lend me a camel that will go a thousand leagues a day,  
 To take me back to my old home.'  
 When her father and mother heard their daughter was back,  
 Leaning on each other, they went out of the suburb gates.  
 When the elder sister heard her little sister had come,  
 She went to the door and put rouge on her face.  
 When her little brother heard his elder sister had come,  
 He whetted his knife and darted like lightning  
 Towards the pigs and goats.  
 'I opened the gates that led to the eastern apartments,  
 I sat down on my bed in the western apartments.  
 Then I took off my soldier's robes  
 And put on the dress that I was wont to wear.  
 I stood at the window to dress my cloudy hair.

I went to the mirror and put on my yellow make-up.  
 I went out of the gates and saw my mess-mates,  
 And what a shock they got on seeing me!  
 'Oh we were living with you for full twelve years,  
 Yet never knew that Mu-lan was a girl!  
 For the male hare tucks its feet in when it sits,  
 And the female hare is known by her bleary eye.  
 But when two hares are bounding side by side,  
 How can you then tell female from the male?

This, incidentally, might serve as a symbol of true equality between the sexes: one should not be distracted by the way a male sits, or be so ungallant as to notice a female's bleary eye; we should see all hares as, somehow, "bounding side by side," so that no one could tell the difference between male or female, man or woman.

The voice in this folksong is clearly not exclusively male. Like many folksongs, the persona in the poem can shift from the neutral vantage point of the storyteller, as at the beginning of this poem, adopt dialogue form, with question and answer responses, as in the fourth to the eighth lines, then turn into the equivalent of an interior monologue as towards the end of the poem. The story is dramatized in lyric form, with shifts in persona from impersonal narrator to interlocutor to the interior voice of Mu-lan herself.

I concentrate on this poem not merely to share a famous ballad which is justly admired for its power to stir the feelings, but also because it is an example of what might be called "ironic male chauvinism." On the surface, the ballad admires the imposture of a girl who passed herself off as a warrior for "full twelve years." But the beginning of the poem, assuming that ladies have nothing better to do than pine away for men, asks:

"O lady, are you brooding on your love?" Mu-lan's answer is: "Indeed, I have no love at all to brood on." It is not only that she lacks an elder brother (the poem shows later on that she does have a younger brother), but also that she lacks a suitor that makes her available for twelve years of "combat duty." She is praised because she was, for her comrades in arms, she was "brave in her deeds." (Here, the translator took certain liberties, for this is an interpolated phrase that does not exist in the original, which reads, simply: "Raised up twelve ranks.") The interesting thing about this narrative is that Mu-lan is not censured for presuming to be a man. Clearly, she is admired because she embodied the martial attributes of the soldier and the warrior, and there is no sense of unnaturalness about her twelve years in battle, no hint in the poem that she has unworthily usurped a man's place. Indeed, the last lines express an egalitarian theme that is very modern. When it comes to getting the job done, as in war, there is no need to distinguish between a male warrior and a female warrior. The point is that the martial instinct can exist in a woman as well as a man: the aspect of *yang* may be found in a woman, just as the quality of *yin* can be found in a man.

We have encountered three women who,

each in her individual way, achieved eminence by masquerading as a man, either as scholar, as ruler, or as warrior. One might think that these roles are gender specific; if so, then each of these figures would hardly have attracted admiration. But what is clear, in at least the cases of Ban Zhao and Wu Zetian, their allegiance to women was not erased in their accession to power. The point about the roles of scholar, ruler, and warrior is not that they were conceived of as male roles, but that they were neutral roles restricted to males. In all three cases, the role was performed as well as any man could have performed them; in the case of Wu Zetian, one could argue that she was better at administration than her husband, Tang Gaozong.

Our last figure is remembered, tragically, for serving her country as a woman. Wang Zhaojun was a concubine of the Han court, whose story might be divided

Zhaojun brushes off the inlaid saddle,  
Mounts her steed, tearstains on reddened cheeks.  
Today, she's a lady in the palace of Han;  
Tomorrow, a slave-girl in the northern steppes.

(Eoyang, 10)

Part of the legend is that when she died, the tumulus in which she was buried remained eternally green, symbolizing her devotion to her country and memorializing her sacrifice. In the following quatrain, Li Bai assumes

The Yanzhi, through the long winter, blossoms out in snow;  
Her delicate beauty is downcast, buried in the desert wastes.  
In life, too poor to bribe the painter with gold;  
In death, a green grave-mound to make one grieve.

(Eoyang, 11)

In an extended "Meditation on Ancient Sites" [詠懷古跡], Du Fu speaks of her fame

into two parables: one, the haughty beauty, too proud to bribe the court painter to flatter her looks in his portrait; as a result of which, when the Emperor had to "fob" off a "princess" to the Hsiung-nu barbarians, not knowing how beautiful she really was, she was chosen as surety to the barbarian chieftain to insure peace at the border. The *Han Shu* tells us that the chieftain "was so delighted he signed a treaty that guaranteed the western borders as far as Tunhuang." This part of the story is an allegory in female pride. The second part of the story, her marriage to a barbarian chieftain, perceived by the Chinese as a living death, is what makes her a heroine in Chinese literature. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of poems, were written lamenting her fate in the forbidding steppes, far from home, consigned to a miserable existence married to an uncouth barbarian. Li Bai composed two of the more memorable quatrains:

that it was poverty and not pride that prevented Wang Zhaojun from paying the corrupt painter a bribe; the reference to "Yanzhi" is an epithet to the chieftain's consort:

over the centuries:

For a thousand years, her lute spoke out in foreign accents,  
But we have understood clearly her descant on grief.

(Eoyang, 11)

Wang Zhaojun's fate is determined by her beauty as a woman, which brought her in the first place to the imperial seraglio, and by her pride (or her poverty), which prevented her from bribing the court painter, resulting in the emperor choosing her as the chieftain's betrothed. She cannot, it is implied, dishonor her marriage to the barbarian, since she is the emperor's surety of his good faith. In the ninth century *bianwen* version, she dies of grief, and her sacrifice is sanctified by this moving tribute by an envoy from the Han court:

Now, this year, this month, on this day, I respectfully make libation of this purest wine, in honor of the Han princess, and to propitiate the departed Wang Zhaojun. Quintessence of beauty in heaven and earth, this lady, in all the world unsurpassed in beauty and grace, was betrothed to a vassal, as a result of a portrait, and her marriage brought fealty from the Hsiung-nu chieftain, as surety of faith to ward off invasion. This noble lady, whose dignity and courage is heard of once in five hundred years, her virtue will be seen again only when the Yellow River flows clear.... Alas, she dies among the barbarians, but how could her soul ever forget the capital? How desolate, that grave-mound on the horizon, between heaven and earth, that patch of green hill, forever forlorn!  
(Eoyang, 15)

There are various versions of Wang Zhaojun's death. The most famous is, of

course, Ma Zhiyuan's account, in his *Han-gong qiu*: she jumps off the bridge over the Heilongjiang, just as the entourage heads for barbarian territories. Ma Zhiyuan spares Wang Zhaojun the ignominy of living out her days with a barbarian (his version of "Better dead than Red"). But perhaps the most poignant version of Wang Zhaojun's death occurs in the *Qin Cao* 琴操 ("The Principles of the Lute"), a first-century account, which has the touch if not of romance, then of what we would call anthropology:

Zhaojun had a son by the chieftain called Shiwei. When the chieftain died, the son Shiwei succeeded him. Now, among the barbarians, when the father dies, one takes the mother to wife. Zhaojun asked her son: "Are you Chinese or barbarian?" Shiwei replied: "I am more barbarian." Zhaojun thereupon swallowed poison, and committed suicide. The Chieftain, her son, erected a tomb for her. In the steppes, where the grass is white and withered, this tumulus alone is green.

What is fascinating about the Wang Zhaojun story is that she is heroic as a female: as concubine, consort, and mother. Her personal sacrifice is seen as a guarantee of peace along China's western border, more effective than a standing army, more reliable than the best general. She is the epitome of what could be called a *yin* hero. Her service is submissive; her heroism is to be

compliant. In that sense, it is important that she be as proud before she is sent off to marry the barbarian as she is submissive after she is wed to the chieftain. Her submissiveness is an act of patriotism, manifesting obedience to the emperor, showing devotion to her country.

In this sense, Wang Zhaojun is very much her own hero: she is no echo or shadow of a male. She is the epitome of compliance, the repeated victim of male dominance, whether the painter who extorted bribes from her, the emperor who sent her away by mistake, or the barbarian chieftain whose hostage she was. Yet the story elevates her above the male characters, as rising above her fate even as she suffers it. Her courage is not the momentary boldness of physical action, but the unending burden of a bitter existence. Where male chauvinistic notions of heroism involve quick, decisive action, Wang Zhaojun is heroic in a different sense. Her heroism consists of forbearance and self-sacrifice. If men have been, more often than not, the eponymous heroes in Chinese history, women have been the anonymous heroes.

That is why an exhibit like *Views from Jade Terrace* is very important. I don't think it could have been mounted in China, on either side of the Taiwan Straits. Only from the contemporary perspective, which aspires to a less hierarchical notion of gender could one contemplate such an effort. I am moved by the import of Marsha Weidner's comments in the catalogue:

On the whole, Chinese women painters were sustainers rather than innovators. Their inventive potential

was limited by conventions designed to support the rigorously patricarchal social system of premodern China [*Views*, 13].

I see this exhibition, *Views from Jade Terrace*, in perhaps a perverse light. Impressive as these productions are, I cannot escape the sense of male domination in this art created by women; I see the oppression of painting orthodoxy — inexorably male — imposed on these women artists. Much of what is in the exhibition is indisputably derivative, but this, in my view, is not the reflex pejorative judgment of a male aesthete. Properly "deconstructed," it is a sad commentary on the narrow-mindedness and insecurity of an oppressive and intractable male ideology. What would these women artists in China have accomplished if they hadn't been shackled with male orthodoxy? How unexpected might their contributions have been if their imaginations and energies were not concentrated solely on fulfilling the requirements of a male artistic canon? If this exhibition is impressive, there will be the inevitable, if implicit, male condescension that thinks: "Not bad for a woman!" And if this exhibition is unimpressive — and I am told by the organizers that not a few male art historians thought these items barely worthy of notice — the mediocrity would serve as a complacent reminder of inherent male superiority. My view is more subversive: I find it sad that, good as these efforts are, how much better, how much more imaginative they would have been if they hadn't been restricted by the impulse to satisfy a male aesthetic. Even the vermilion marks of correction on the Empress Cixi's

amateur productions (#73 in the Exhibition) are poignant. How many emperors, male rulers of China, one is tempted to ask, would have brooked this kind of a correction from their instructors? Would Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty, for example, have tolerated this kind of admonishment? And if emperors perhaps did undergo apprenticeships during which their inadequacies of style and technique were pointed out, would the physical evidences of these inadequacies not been destroyed? The very fact that Empress Cixi's painting exercise survives is instructive: it reminds us that she was considered a woman before she was thought of as an Empress. How much more might women artists in China have accomplished had they not tried to follow the influence of men, had not tried so diligently to be "echoes and shadows" to their male counterparts?

These ruminations seek to redress a balance: I have tried to explore the significant other — the contribution of women to Chinese history, by way of contrast to the insignificant self — the ideal of male modesty. There is, in Chinese thought, a sense of complementarity quite at odds with the monotheistic and monolithic allegiances in the West to the true faith, the divine word. Chinese thought is a composite of the *yang* spirit in Confucianism and of the *yin* spirit in Daoism. If Daoism is the significant other in Chinese culture, Confucianism is the insignificant self. Buddhism might be an amalgam of both. It is perhaps no accident that Wu Zetian was a champion of

Buddhism.

We have encountered women imitating men — like Ban Zhao, Wu Zetian, Mu-lan — but men assuming the role of women are not hard to find: in the twentieth century one thinks of the brilliant Mei Lanfang; more recently, there is Song Liling in David Henry Hwang's play, "M." Speaking, as unavoidably I must, from the male vantage point, I propose that we males learn from our "better parts," that we recognize the significance of the other, and acknowledge — in true Confucian humility — our own insignificance.

One salutes the generations of unheralded women who have anonymously shaped Chinese culture; one pays tribute to the stalwart women, who, as wives and mothers, supported often feckless husbands, wayward sons.

Women in China, without a doubt, have been long suffering. They have literally borne the burden of its patriarchal heritage. It has taken more courage to be a woman in China than a man, and it is this courage that the woman-poet, Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1877-1907), martyred for her belief in the equality of the sexes, a cause often characterized as feminist, but which *should* be seen as humanist. It is only appropriate that a woman should have the last word. Qiu Jin's lines haunt us even now:

My sex disqualifies me  
For the role of male,  
But my heart  
Is more heroic than a man's.

(Lo and Shultz, 402-403)

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## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> *The Dong Han Yanyi*, a fictionalized history, puts her death at 117 A.D. at the age of seventy, which would mean that she was born in 48 A.D.; cf. Nancy Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar in China* (New York: Century), 1932, p. 60.
- <sup>2</sup> Alas; her counsel was not heeded by her male counterparts, and her recommendations were largely ignored with few exceptions: in 1738, Lan Luzhou (藍鹿洲) wrote his treatise on "The Education of Women" (女學); and 1825, when Li Ruzhen 李汝珍 in his novel *Jing Hua Yuan 鏡花緣* ("Flowers in a Mirror") advocated the admission of women to the imperial examinations, thus allowing women access to the halls of power in the ruling elite.
- <sup>3</sup> I cite the translation by J. D. Frodsham, in *An Anthology of Chinese Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 104-106.