

Wilt L. Idema. *Heroines of Jiangyong: Chinese Narrative Ballads in Women's Script*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009. viii +181 pp. US\$60.00 cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-98841-2; US\$25.00 paper, ISBN 978-0-295-98842.

Wilt Idema's *Heroines of Jiangyong* is the first English translation of a set of *nüshu* 女書 (female literature) verse narratives. The term *nüshu* refers to a gender-specific writing system circulated exclusively among women in Jiangyong 江永 county in southern Hunan. This unique female script was used by women in rural Jiangyong for correspondence and life-narrative compositions beginning sometime during China's late imperial period, though unknown to the outside world until 1982. Mostly illiterate in the use of official Chinese *hanzi* 漢字 characters, these women also transcribed male-written *hanzi* ballads known as *changben* 唱本 (song books) into *nüshu* so as to enjoy them at their own convenience—for the most part, access to these stories was limited to performances by amateur male peasant actors during the winter months.

Approximately 500 texts have been collected during the past three decades, ranging from four-line poems to long autobiographical songs and narrative *changben*. Working primarily from Zhao Liming's study,¹ Idema has translated nine *changben* ballads and three didactic tracts into English. To help readers achieve a broader understanding of these stories, he has also written an introductory chapter that is rich with historical and literary references—very useful for comparative analyses.

The *nüshu*-transcribed *changben* ballads address the female ideal by telling the stories of exemplary women. The nine stories include *Sangu ji* 三姑記 (The tale of the third sister) in which a filial daughter treats her mother with care, even though she is the target of maternal hatred and told to remarry because of her husband's destitution; *Maihua nü* 賣花女 (The flower-selling girl), about a virtuous wife who supports her family when her husband is unable to do so; *Lady Luo* (羅氏女), *Lady Xiao* (肖氏女), and *Mengjiang nü* 孟姜女 (The maiden Meng Jiang), stories about chaste women who demonstrate strong will and perseverance in the face of the prolonged absences of their husbands; *Wang wu niang* 王五娘 (Fifth daughter Wang), describing a pious woman who is rewarded with rebirth as a man so as to save her family from its mortal destiny; and *Liyu jing* 鯉魚精 (Demonic carp), about a victimized woman who approaches Judge Bao 包 to ask for justice. The only negative example (though Idema classifies it as a moral tract) is *Lanpo niang* 懶婆娘 (The lazy wife), about a talkative and sloppy housewife who is held up to scorn and ridicule by the story's author.

The didactic tracts were clearly designed to teach hard life lessons. *Xunnü ci* 訓女詞 (Admonitions for my daughter) is a reworking of a poem by a female member of the local gentry named Pu Bixian 蒲碧仙 (1804-60). Pu wrote the

¹ Zhao Liming 趙麗明, *Zhongguo nüshu jicheng* 中國女書集成 (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 1992).

poem to instruct her bride-to-be daughter to be diligent and virtuous—part of a female tradition that can be traced back 2,000 years to Ban Zhao's 班昭 (45-117) *Nüjie* 女戒 (Female precepts). The other two tracts—*Shiyue huaitai* 十月懷胎 (Ten months of pregnancy) and *Chuanjia bao* 傳家寶 (Family heirloom), both written by unknown authors—address parental (especially maternal) worries during all stages of childhood and adolescence, and the need to always be filial. Many other examples of parental admonitions are found in Chinese vernacular texts such as the *Fumu enzhong jing jiangjingwen* 父母恩重經講經文 (Surtra explanation text on the importance of parental love), which were found in the Dunhuang Caves.

Heroines of Jiangyong is a valuable addition to contemporary scholarship of Chinese literature, especially regarding studies of Chinese peasant women and *changben*. Recent attempts have been made to uncover voices of Chinese gentry women (for example, women living in the Lower Yangzi region during China's late imperial period), but little is known about the lives of peasant women because of the lack of historical documentation. *Changben* is also the least examined genre of Chinese prosimetric literature, with research largely confined to content analyses of the historicities of narrated stories and their textual transformation over time. This is primarily due to the lack of references on authors, audiences, and intended uses. The *nüshu*-transcribed *changben* that are the primary focus of *Heroines of Jiangyong*, nevertheless, offer fertile ground for addressing broader questions regarding the *changben* genre's social implications and the daily lives of rural women. With specific information on the historical, regional, and social contexts of their users (peasant women in nineteenth to mid-twentieth century Jiangyong), the *nüshu*-transcribed *changben* presented in this book support an expanded analytical scope from textual to intertextual—specifically, examinations of dialogic interactions between the *changben* texts and the contexts in which they were read, listened to, and performed.

At the textual level, these *nüshu changben* provide a rare window into the everyday lives of rural daughters, mothers, and wives. Although the original stories were not composed by women, the fact that Jiangyong women made the effort to transcribe them indicates that the ballads must have struck a note in their inner worlds and lived realities. The stories clearly address such concerns as female virtue (fidelity, filiality, diligence, perseverance), strength (courage, wisdom, initiative), vulnerability (dangers associated with leaving their domestic quarters), hopes for justice, fantasies of imagined lives, and social regulations regarding role-playing, sexuality, and other gender norms. One of the fine examples is *Liangzhu yinyuan* 梁祝姻緣 (The karmic affinity of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai), which emphasizes the female protagonist's chastity, intelligence, and aspirations for education; her frustration over the unyielding social order; and the larger issues of gender equality and ideal companionate marital relations. At the end of this story, both Shanbo and Yingtai die for love and they turn into a pair of mandarin ducks ascending to Heaven, strongly suggesting that the chaos resulting from Shanbo's obsession and Yingtai's cross-dressing must eventually surrender to the doctrines

of filial piety and androcentrism. Such transgressions exist only in fantasies; otherwise tragedy is the only possible destiny.

When intertextualizing these *changben* with *nüshu* women's compositions, it is possible to see centripetal and centrifugal relations between portrayals of rural women by male literati and rural women's self-projections. Examples of centripetal correlation between *nüshu* transcriptions and *nüshu* compositions include the legal awareness shown in *Maishua nü changben* (in which a woman appeals to Judge Bao for social justice regarding her refusal to become a concubine of the emperor's father-in-law), as well as in a *nüshu* narrative about an early twentieth century peasant woman who asks a judge to grant her a divorce because of her husband's brutality. Another example is the female savior image, presented in both the *Fifth Daughter Wang changben* and a *nüshu* narrative in which a man is protected from a tiger attack by his wife and daughter.

The two story forms also have important differences. Whereas *changben* emphasize harmonious ties between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, *nüshu* texts lament their tensions and conflicts, especially viciousness on the part of mothers-in-law. Sisterhood relationships are completely overlooked in *changben*, but are indispensable to *nüshu*. Chastity is described as a moral absolute in *changben*, but in *nüshu* narratives it is conceptualized in relation to one's fertility. As depicted in many *nüshu* biographic laments, if a husband was conscripted into the army and failed to send a message home for many years, the sonless wife was not considered unchaste if she remarried. This is quite different from the idea presented in *Mengjiang nü*, about a wife who travels thousands of miles to deliver clothes to her husband, who was forced to give his labor to building the Great Wall. The fact that these *nüshu* transcriptions do not fully represent the sense and sensibility of Jiangyong women reminds us that *changben* texts are not transparent reflections of lived reality, but parts of an intertextual network through which we can analyze rural Chinese society and social dynamics, including gender and class differences and negotiations between social codes and personal sentiments.

In short, as an intersection of male composition and female reception, the *nüshu*-transcribed *changben* not only illustrate the projections of ideal womanhood promoted by male literati, but also provide access to a context-sensitive understanding of how illiterate peasant women were socialized into the Confucian mainstream through folk narratives, while still asserting their subjectivity. In this regard, Idema's *Heroines of Jiangyong* serves as an excellent point of departure for exploring rural women's complex lifeworlds—their intricate sensibilities, their efforts to simultaneously conform to and transform the existing social order, and their reflections of being in-the-world while at the same time probing beneath the surface in search of hope of better life.

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