

*Readings in Chinese Women's Philosophical and Feminist Thought: From the Late 13th to Early 21st Century.* Edited by Ann A. Pang-White and translated by Ann A. Pang-White et al. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Pp. xx + 436. £100.00 hardcover.

This is a quite comprehensive work of translation focusing on women's literature, feminism, and philosophy in China from the late thirteenth century to the modern day. Through the translation of selected works, the editor introduces literary writings to showcase women's philosophical and feminist thought and how such thought developed over time. Relevant works from representative female writers and insightful male scholars have been chosen and briefly analysed.

The selected literary works reflect a general image of women's thought, social status, and images through history. The editor highlights some significant but lesser-known historical women for discussion and also explores male scholars' perceptions of women at the same time. The period covered spans the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as the Republic era, illustrating the ongoing struggles of women in life and their contributions to the literary world.

The preface sets out chronologically important historical events related to the philosophies and women in Chinese history. Listed in table form are the early mythologies and legends such as Nüwa 女媧, the goddess who patched up the falling sky; the birth of various schools of philosophy; and Wu Zetian's 武則天 (r. 690–705) ascension to become the first empress to rule China in her own name. Organised in five sections, the rest of the book contains a wealth of literary examples from the Yuan dynasty onwards.

Aside from the Introduction, which provides terse and lucid definitions of "feminism" and "philosophy," each of the following four sections is dedicated to a specific dynasty or period. In each, selected influential authors of that time and their more significant works are presented in English.

In the second section, on the Yuan dynasty, the editor quotes two popular plays about women, namely *The Injustice Done to Dou E* (*Dou E yuan* 竇娥冤) and *The Soul of Qian-Nü Leaves Her Body* (*Qian-Nü libun* 倩女離魂). The former is the script of a drama by Guan Hanqing 關漢卿 (c. 1240–1320). It tells the story of a virtuous and filial lady named Dou E 竇娥, who was wrongly accused of killing her mother-in-law and tragically beheaded. The play demonstrates the desperation of women for justice at that time. The latter, by Zheng Guangzu 鄭光祖 (c. 1260–?), is about a chaste young girl named Qian-Nü 倩女, who, deeply bound by Confucian values and conventions, scarcely steps out of her chamber. In an attempt to join her lover, her soul leaves her body and follows him to the imperial capital, eventually reuniting with her body after returning home. The editor's evaluation of each writer and their literary works is both analytical and objective, such as the annotation to *The Soul of Qian-Nü Leaves Her Body*:

“in that spiritual freedom, she is free to express her love passionately, courageously, and unwaveringly” (p. 42).

*The Injustice Done to Dou E* is based on a supposedly genuine case recorded in Ban Gu's 班固 (32–92) *Book of Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書) from the Han dynasty and Gan Bao's 干寶 (fl. c. 283–351) *In Search of the Supernatural* (*Sou shen ji* 搜神記) from the Jin dynasty. The story of *The Soul of Qian-Nü Leaves Her Body* originates from the *Record of the Departed Soul* (*Lihun ji* 離魂記) from the Tang-dynasty *chuanqi* 傳奇 short story,<sup>1</sup> which portrays a girl in ancient times who tries to follow her lover spiritually to protest her parents' opposition to their marriage.

The selected female writers of the Yuan dynasty are iconic figures, such as the highly acclaimed artist Guan Daosheng 管道昇 (1262–1319) and the sister poetesses, Xue Lanying 薛蘭英 and Xue Huiying 薛蕙英 (c. 14th century). Also included are male scholars' who wrote prolifically on women, such as Guo Jujing 郭居敬 (?–c. 1350?), possibly the author of *The Twenty-Four Exemplars of Filial Piety* (*Ershisi xiao* 二十四孝), who wrote stories about model women, such as Lady Tang 唐夫人, who fed her elderly mother-in-law with breastmilk, and Yang Xiang 楊香, who saved her father from a tiger.

In the third section, on the Ming dynasty, the editor highlights some female scholars, such as Empress Renxiaowen 仁孝文皇后 (1362–1407), Madame Liu 劉氏 (?–?), Ma Shouzhen 馬守真 (1548–1604), and the beautiful courtesan, Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618–1664). Empress Renxiaowen was a humble erudite Confucian scholar who wrote *Teachings for the Inner Court* (*Neixun* 內訓) and *Exhorting Good* (*Quanshan shu* 勸善書), advocating better qualities and moral conduct for imperial ladies, such as chastity, virtue, tranquillity, etc. These two pieces were promulgated to the populace by an imperial edict soon after her death.

The editor also introduces some outstanding male writers, namely Wang Daokun 汪道昆 (1525–1593), Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), Zhao Nanxing 趙南星 (1550–1627), and Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616), the last of whom is the most respected playwright in Chinese literary history. Tang's masterpieces, referred to as the “Four Dreams of Linchuan” (*Linchuan si meng* 臨川四夢) include the *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭) — a play about a girl who died of lovesickness after dreaming of a gentleman but was resurrected to become his wife. It reveals “Tang's reflection on the question of the reality and his interest in the Buddhist and Daoist, in contrast to Confucian realism” (p. 110).

<sup>1</sup> See Yuan Lükun 袁閻琨 and Xue Hongji 薛洪勳, eds., *Tang Song Chuanqi Zongji* (*Tang Wu Dai* 唐宋傳奇總集 (唐五代)) (Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin Chubanshe, 2001), pp. 161–64.

Wang Daokun, on the other hand, is known for his *Biographies of Women* (*Lienü zhuan* 列女傳). His work was illustrated by the prestigious painter Qiu Ying 仇英 (c. 1494–1552) and became widely known as *Qiu Shizhou's Illustrated Biographies of Women* (*Qiu Shizhou xiuxiang lienü zhuan* 仇十洲繡像列女傳). It compiles the stories of two girls, Consort Lou 婁妃 and Li Miaoyuan 李妙緣, who chose death for virtue and love. Lou wrote several poems to stop her husband from usurping the throne before drowning herself. Li submitted a petition to the imperial court to save her thirty-two-year-old husband, who had been sentenced to death, by offering herself as a substitute so as to preserve the family lineage. Her bravery and spirit of sacrifice won a grant of reprieve from the imperial court to review her husband's case.

Zhao Nanxing was notable for editing the *Classic for Teaching Young Girls* (*Nüer jing kesong ben* 女兒經課誦本), a textbook for female education popular during the Ming and Qing period. Its purpose is to teach girls proper behaviour and etiquette, such as keeping their voices down when speaking, avoiding gossiping, reminding their husbands to be honest officials, not harassing poor family members, and keeping on good terms with neighbours and relatives.

In the fourth section, on the Qing dynasty, the editor discusses figures such as Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), Chen Menglei 陳夢雷 (1650–1741), Chen Hongmou 陳宏謀 (1696–1771), Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1798), and Li Ruzhen 李汝珍 (c. 1763–1830), the novelist who wrote *Flowers in the Mirror* (*Jing hua yuan* 鏡花緣). In this novel, he advocated for women's equal rights in education and politics through the creation of the "Kingdom of Women": "Where it differs from us is that in this country men wear dresses, play the women's role, and attend to domestic matters, whereas women on the contrary wear boots and hats, play the men's role, and manage external affairs" (p. 203).

Chen Menglei, in contrast, authored 376 *juan* on biographies, literary writings, and philosophical works of historical women in his encyclopaedia *Complete Collection of Illustrations and Books from Antiquity to the Present* (*Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成).

Pu Songling gained fame from his collection of fiction *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異), which consists of 496 short stories written in classical Chinese. The editor provides a scholarly evaluation of Pu's most famous story, "The Painted Skin":

...[T]he story exposes society's stereotypical view of what is beautiful and ugly, what is sane and insane, by taking the reader into a fantasy world of a beautiful young woman who was in fact a violent demonic spirit in disguise and a filthy homeless man who turns out to be an unlikely hero. (p. 169)

There were quite a number of famous female writers in the Qing dynasty. The editor has chosen to present Xi Peilan 席佩蘭 (c. 1760–1829?) and Sun Yunfeng 孫雲鳳 (1764–1814), the two finest students of the famous poet, writer, and artist Yuan Mei, literary leader of the School of Innate Sensibility (Xingling 性靈). The editor also explores the revolutionary heroine Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875–1907), the Chinese feminist He Zhen 何震 (1884–c. 1920), and Madame Shen-Zhang 沈張氏, who received an imperial commendation for her chastity and filial piety and wrote a preface to the *Illustrated Four Books for Women with Explanation in Vernacular Chinese* (*Tuhui nü sishu baihua jie* 圖繪女四書白話解).

The fifth and final section on the Republic era has extensive coverage, spanning one hundred and fifty pages and accounting for a third of the entire book. Within this section, works on women by prominent male writers Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) and Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) are introduced. Hu strongly opposed the commendation of women's chastity in law: "Since the law neither commends men's chastity nor punishes them for their lack of chastity, then it should not alone advocate women's chastity" (p. 259).

The selection of female writers tends to focus on those in Taiwan, with the exception of Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986) and the renowned novelist Eileen Chang 張愛玲 (1920–1995). Other writers covered include the politician Lü Hsiu-lien 呂秀蓮 (1944–), the writer Li Ang 李昂 (1952–), and the Buddhist feminist Shih Chao-Hwei 釋昭慧 (1957–), who are all Taiwanese. In particular, Lü Hsiu-lien is quoted as having made an interesting assertion:

What is feminine disposition? "It is like, after smoking opium, the sleepy feeling of gentle beauty." A completely feminized woman should be a sexy animal. She regards pleasing men [as] her lifelong vocation and guarding [the] kitchen with her life her natural duty. In other words, the precept of "feminism" is that the value of a woman's existence is to attach herself to men. (p. 290)

In summary, this book of over four hundred pages encompasses a wide range of literary genres, including poetry, didactic works, drama, novels, literary criticism, and critiques on women. The literary works are not limited to female writers but also include some by male playwrights, writers, and scholars. Its content covers a variety of aspects, ranging from discussing historical literary figures and talented women to evaluating male writers' works on women, as well as examining female characters in novels and scripts, and politicians' perceptions of women's rights in modern times.

The translators have obviously made every effort in their translations of Chinese classical and modern writings on women and by women into English. Owing to the significant differences in the grammar of the languages and in the philosophical and logical structures of classical Chinese and English, the challenge is immense. It is not always easy to find precise and accurate expressions to convey the exact meanings and concepts found in classical Chinese texts.

The editor and translators deserve credit for having largely accomplished a difficult task, as translating classical Chinese and poetry requires in-depth research and a level of appreciation beyond the literal. The translator must first decode and interpret the classical texts and poetry into vernacular Chinese and then further translate them into English based on the vernacular meanings. This process is time-consuming and prone to error, and any misinterpretation or mistranslation of a single word can alter the meaning or miss the subtleties of a poem or passage.

The selection of literary works in the book is generally well done for three reasons: first, the selected works possess a certain level of representativeness for their respective periods; second, they exclusively depict and focus on women; and third, they showcase women's social status, achievements, lives, love, and marriage, as well as men's perceptions of these from different perspectives. This book covers a great variety of topics such as social norms, gender inequality, female education, women's rights, marital relationships, men's perceptions, and women's self-examination. Quite a few of the ideas expressed by Ming and Qing scholars in this work place greater emphasis on gender equality than we might expect, and would be regarded as more "civilized" views in modern society.

A notable feature of this book is that the layout is arranged in chronological order by dynasty. The editor first introduces the biographical background of these writers, and then cites and translates their works. For some of the important works or ideas of these writers, brief comments are provided to help readers better understand the works in their historical context.

For those who are interested in learning more about Chinese women, feminist thought, and women's literature, this book will be a useful reference and one worth reading. It succinctly combines literature, philosophy, and the social conditions of women in China through the ages, with a focus on the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties and thereafter. The editor also provides detailed notes and an index at the end, which offer a wealth of reference materials for further research on women's literature, studies of ancient and modern women, feminist thought, and other related topics.

There are nonetheless a few minor puzzling points in the book. For instance, the biographical introduction of Chen Menglei appears twice, respectively in both the sections of Yuan and Qing dynasties. Besides, the editor mentions that Guan Daosheng married Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254–1322) "at the age of twenty-eight" and Zhao "was then thirty-six" (p. 61), implying an eight-year difference in age. The next page also states that Guan wrote the poem when "she was over forty years old and her husband was approaching fifty" (p. 62), which also implies they had about less than ten years' difference in age. In fact, the year of their marriage and of Guan's birth

continues to be uncertain even today.<sup>2</sup> Various scholars have suggested different birth years for Guan, such as 1262, 1264, and 1271. Furthermore, Guan had three sons and six daughters, with an estimated childbearing period spanning more than ten years. If she were to marry at the age of twenty-eight, achieving this would appear to be a challenge in ancient times.

This work would have been even more appealing if it included the works by the members of the Jiaoyuan Poetry Society, which as the first female poetry society in the Qing dynasty deserves detailed discussion. The Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧太后 (1835–1908), the *de facto* ruler of the late Qing, also has a famous poem dedicated to her mother which could be expounded. Finally, as a reader, I would prefer a shorter discussion on the ideologies of Taiwanese feminists and a more balanced exploration of the works and ideas of all distinctive female writers.

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<sup>2</sup> One proponent of this argument is Zhao Weijian 趙維江; see *Zhao Mengfu and Guan Daosheng* 趙孟頫與管道升 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2004), pp. 77–78.