KUAN TAO-SHENG: WOMAN ARTIST IN YUAN CHINA

Women scarcely appear in the chronicles of traditional China. When they do, they are mentioned principally in supporting roles. They are rarely the focus of the accounts in the histories; in part by omission, such works accommodated the traditional views of women. Confucian ideology tended to emphasize the accomplishments of men while according women few privileges and rights. As a result, only a small number of women attained prominent positions or achieved renown in a specific profession. Political decision-making was in the hands of men, and only infrequently did women wield political power. The few women who governed traditional China are accorded harsh, biased treatment in the Chinese chronicles. Chinese histories often portrayed the Princess née Lü of the Han dynasty, the Empress Wu of the T'ang, and the Empress Dowager Tz'u Hsi of the Ch'ing, the most prominent female rulers, in the worst possible light. They were represented as

---

1 Such omission has led to the following kinds of stereotypes of women as "downtrodden, lacking in legal rights, hobbled by the bindings of her feet, and at the service, body and soul, of her husband and his family." (As cited in R.W. Guisso and Stanley Johanneson, eds., Women in China: Current Directions in Historical Scholarship (Philo Press: Youngstown, New York, 1981), p. vii).


capricious, conniving, and corrupt, and the Chinese sources are replete with anecdotes attesting to their rapaciousness, their nepotism, and their murderous deeds. Similarly, the more incredible reputed actions of Chiang Ch'ing during the Cultural Revolution may, instead of being totally reliable accounts, reflect some of the same biases on the part of contemporary Chinese reporters or historians, though it is perhaps too early for a proper historical perspective on her role in the 1960s and 1970s. With such stereotyped or biased historical materials, the historian is faced with serious obstacles in assessing the contributions of women in traditional China.

Cultural historians confront even greater difficulties in trying to discover and describe the works of women poets, essayists, artisans, and painters. Since literacy was relatively rare among women, few notable female writers made their mark in Chinese literature. The Han dynasty essayist Pan Chao, labelled by her biographer as the “foremost woman scholar of ancient China,” was one such rare literary figure. Born to a distinguished family—her father Pan Piao was a historian; her brother Pan Ku wrote with her assistance, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty (Han shu)*; and her other brother Pan Ch'ao was an eminently successful military commander in Central Asia—her talents were surely recognized and nurtured. But it is no doubt of significance that the work for which she is most recognized offered advice on etiquette and morality for women that conformed to the Confucian model. She counseled women to be obedient, humble, and respectful and to seek harmony with their in-laws. A woman’s responsibility, according to Pan, was to:

- guard carefully her chastity; to control circumspectly her behavior; in every motion to exhibit modesty; and to model each act on the best usage, this is womanly virtue. To choose her words with care; to avoid vulgar language; to speak at appropriate times; and not to weary others (with much conversation), may be called the characteristics of womanly words. To wash and scrub filth away; to keep clothes and ornaments fresh and clean; to wash the head and bathe the body regularly, and to keep the person free

---
