
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, 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* 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

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A 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 (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* 梁祝姻缘 (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...