



Leng and Shibata

WOMEN AS CHANGE-MAKERS IN CHINESE LITERATURE: FROM TRADITION TO MODERNITY

Seminar Leader: RACHEL LENG; House Leader: JUN SHIBATA

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Course Description

Is it true that since pre-modern times, the more things appear to change, the more things actually stay the same? In this seminar, we will approach the issue with an open mind, putting past and present Chinese stories into dialogue so that we can understand continuities in tradition or its transformation and split in modern times.

This seminar will focus specifically on introducing students to the theme of women as change-makers for the family or the nation as used in Chinese literature, exploring the classical tradition in relation to modern stories penned by some of the most renowned Chinese writers. How have women been represented as the nation? Both the premodern and modern stories differ in their approach to portraying women – what are the different contexts and implications for these representations?

We aim at the comparison of renowned works to trace the literary and cultural connections from past and present. By doing so, we can explore how the figure of the woman in classical Chinese literature has changed and yet still remains relevant to modern society.

Message from the Seminar Leader

皆さん、こんにちは! My name is Rachel Leng and I am a first-year Master's student in the Regional Studies – East Asia program at Harvard University. I completed my undergraduate majors in Public Policy and Chinese Studies at Duke University. I am from Singapore, but grew up in China since I was 5 years old. I am very interested in how contemporary Chinese literature and culture reflects and responds to society and politics, particularly issues of gender and migration. If you are interested in China or about studying in the US as an international student, I'd be happy to tell you more! Feel free to contact me at

I will be spending most of the summer studying Japanese in Kyoto, and am very excited to be in beautiful Komatsu! 私は日本料理が大好きです。I hope to try many of Komatsu's specialty dishes and see many beautiful places! Looking forward to meeting all of you. どうぞよろしくお願ひします。

Message from the House Leader

A pleasure to meet you, my name is Jun Alexander Shibata. I am 22 years old, and a fourth year student at Keio University, Tokyo, studying Political Science and Maritime law. Currently on a gap year, and have done internships in London, Boston, Dheli, and have been travelling



different continents, to broaden my world view. Outside of studies, I am a passionate motorsports fan, and a keen musician. I abide by the spirit of British Amateuism; my motto is to study and pursue broadly, and to actively embrace all kinds of learning.

The seminar I will be co-teaching is on Chinese literature; a set of values that has largely influenced what Japan is today. To study the connections between traditional and modern Chinese literature, may be an interesting process to find the similarities and differences between China and Japan, and maybe other countries. I look forward to meeting you all, and to learn from you. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email me at

Pre-Assignments

Traditional

- Goddess Nüwa
- Hua Mulan

Modern

- Lu Xun's *Mending Heaven*
- Eileen Chang's *Lust, Caution*

Course Schedule

Final Presentation Topic

Students will work on identifying their own classical story of interest which features the theme of a female character as the change-maker, preferably from a different culture. In the second half of the seminar, they will give a short presentation (5-10 minutes) on the folklore story and describe how the same story is retold in modern times. It will be important to try and identify why this story is still being told today, and how it is relevant to contemporary society as well as the role of female characters.

Day-by-Day Schedule

Day 1: *Goddess Nüwa and restoration*

The Chinese goddess Nüwa (女媧) in ancient Chinese mythology is best known for creating mankind and repairing the wall of heaven. She is considered to be a divine creator and repairer, restoring peace after calamities in the human world. Goddess Nüwa's legacy in the Chinese classical tradition is thus always associated with parables about continuous processes of change – both creation and destruction. As the original creator of China, she is also revered as a symbol of the power of motherhood with the ability to save and unite the Chinese nation.

[Pre-readings]

- Synopsis of Goddess Nü Wa (女媧) Mending Heaven (Japanese)



- Nuwa Mending the Sky (picture story): <http://www.pureinsight.org/node/1058>

[Discussion Questions]

- How would you interpret the character of Nu Wa? Is she a creator, mother, or goddess?
- What is the significance of the original creator being a woman? (Compare this with other cultural stories where the creator is usually a male god. For example, Izanagi in Japanese folklore.)
- Can you think of other folklore characters who are creators/mother/goddess figures similar to Nu Wa in other cultures?

Day 2: *Lu Xun and Old Tales Retold*

Lu Xun is a leading figure of modern Chinese literature. He exerted substantial influence after the May Fourth Movement on May 4, 1919, and was highly acclaimed by the Communist regime after 1949. Lu Xun was a highly ironic writer and produced harsh criticism of social problems in China. “Mending Heaven” is a short story that continues the theme that which suggests that even the handiwork of a divine creator mocked its creator’s vision. In this story, Nüwa is used as a figure to criticize China’s constricting dependence on outdated traditions. Lu Xun promotes the idea of the need for women’s liberation, education, and gender equity with the move away from a repressive patriarchal family system. Only by allowing women to be more independent can China achieve greater modernity and become a stronger nation. [Pre-readings]

- Lu Xun, “Mending Heaven” [補天] (English; Sections I and III, 5pgs)

[Discussion Questions]

- What is Lu Xun’s take on the Goddess Nu Wa story? How does this emerge in the text?
- What do you think spurred Lu Xun to twist the original folklore story in his rewriting of the text? Do you agree with what the author has done?
- How does the theme of female creation and motherhood differ between the original tale and in Lu Xun’s story?
- How does Lu Xun’s representation of Nu Wa compare to your own interpretation of the original folktale?

Day 3: *Hua Mulan in the Army*

Hua Mulan is a legendary figure from ancient China who was originally described in a Chinese poem known as the Ballad of Mulan (木蘭辭). In the poem, Hua Mulan takes her aged father’s place in the army. She fought for twelve years and gained high merit, but she refused any reward and retired to her hometown instead. The story of Hua Mulan



has inspired a number of screen and stage adaptations in the modern era. She is also commonly perceived as a heroine for gender equity and women's independence.

[Pre-readings]

- Synopsis of the Hua Mulan [花木蘭] story (e.g.: “Ballad of Mulan” [木蘭辭] or Mulan Joins the Army (1903)) (Japanese)
- Read “Poem of Mulan” (Pick 1 translation) [English; 3 pages]
- Website passage: <http://china.mrdonn.org/mulan.html>

[Discussion Questions]

- What do you think of the theme of cross-dressing in Mulan? Is it empowering for gender equity, or restricting?
- In your opinion, how does Mulan's story represent gender equity?
- How many different kinds of “boundary” crossings can you identify in this text? (e.g.: gender, political, age.)
- What are the implications of a girl acting as a man? Consider the historical context in premodern times when the work was created.
- Why is it controversial that a girl was depicted as a soldier fighting for her country and in place of a man? Consider the patriarchal context in Chinese history.

Day 4: *Women soldiers and martyrs*

Eileen Chang (September 30, 1920 – September 8, 1995) was one of the most influential modern Chinese writers. One of her most famous works is *Lust, Caution*. Chang is noted for her fiction writings that deal with the tensions between men and women in love and everyday life. Chang's portrayal of life in 1940s Shanghai and Japanese-occupied Hong Kong is remarkable in its focus on everyday life and the absence of the political subtext which characterized many other writers of the period. Of particular interest is her perspective on changing gender relations in contemporary China. *Lust, Caution* reveals a woman's awakening to her female independence and political identity in a changing China during World War II.

[Pre-readings]

- Synopsis of (in Japanese) Eileen Chang's *Lust, Caution*
- Short movie clips for *Lust, Caution* (2007) [Directed by Ang Lee]
 - *Lust, Caution* (色戒) personal cut
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5QsHPE8Gko>
 - 『ラスト、コーション』予告編
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5QsHPE8Gko>
- Japanese Restaurant Scene:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5QsHPE8Gko>



[Discussion questions]

- How does the heroine use her female body and sexuality to her advantage? Do you think this is empowering or a restrictive character? To what extent is this successful?
- What are the links between Mu Lan and the main female character (Wong Chia Chi)?
- How does Eileen Chang use a female protagonist to explore ethical and political boundaries, particularly with gender roles?
- Why do you think this movie made the censors ban this movie? What is politically incorrect in Eileen Chang's story?