



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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## Women in Traditional China and their Portrayal in Chinese Folktales

Curriculum Unit 84.04.03  
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### Introduction

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China is a vast, sprawling country that has long been an enigma to the Western world. The Westerner's view of the Chinese has been greatly colored by the media. The screen has portrayed Chinese men as Confucius-spouting Charlie Chan types or violent and cold-blooded torturers that are well versed in the martial arts. Most Americans and Europeans are familiar with the eternal image of Dr. Fu Manchu and his friends who are callous, opium-smoking criminals. Then of course, there are the commonly known jokes about Chinese delicacies and the preference for unborn mice, monkey brains hot from hacked-off heads, hundred year old eggs and snakes cooked alive in boiling rice.

Finally, there is the West's conception of the Oriental woman. In the American films of the 1920s and '30s, she was depicted as the delicate and suppliant concubine who was carried about by her servants. This image has given way to that of the modern Chinese woman in Mao inspired clothing who might refer to her fellow worker as comrade. She is supposedly liberated from the bondage of the past, but still considered docile, gentle, and respondent to a man's needs and pleasures.

The role of women in traditional China is a curious one. Though they were expected to be totally subservient to men and had no legal rights in the society, there were Chinese women who wielded great power and influence. There are the legendary stories of the concubine who used her beauty and charm to gain political and economic power.

China's traditional attitudes toward women as reflected in folktales will be the focus of this unit. Folktales will be the medium through which Chinese women will be examined because they provide a rich source of information for understanding a people. Folklore and folktales are an important component in the culture of any given people. It is a fabric into which has been woven the institutions, traditions, customs, beliefs and attitudes of a people. It is important to recognize that the folktale serves as more than a quaint, entertaining tale. Alan Dundes in his well-known book, *The Study of Folklore* points out that folklore has several important functions:

1. It aids in the education of the young.
2. It provides a group's feeling of solidarity.

3. Folklore provides a socially sanctioned way for the individual to act superior or censure the group.
4. It serves as a vehicle for social protest. <sup>1</sup>

It is important that students be given some introduction to the cultural, political and social history of China before delving into the literary material. Familiarization with the time honored traditions and social customs of China will help students gain a richer meaning from the readings. Since the mayor emphasis of this unit will be the traditional views and attitudes toward women in Chinese folktales, it is hoped that students will not only gain a better understanding of Chinese culture and society but will come to realize that a nation's legacy is very much tied up in its storytelling. As noted, author Roger D. Abrahams so aptly states, "storytelling is a fundamental way of codifying hard-won truths and dramatizing the rationale behind traditions." <sup>2</sup>

### **Rationale**

This unit is intended for use among intermediate students at the high school level. Because the folktales make for enjoyable and relatively easy reading, this unit could work well for the reluctant reader. Although this unit is not designed to provide students with an in-depth study of the social and political history of China, it is hoped that by the end of this unit, students will be sensitive to the fact that the social studies and/or geography text is not the only source book for understanding the peoples of the world.

This unit is intended for use in an English course. However, it certainly could be used in conjunction with the materials in a geography or world cultures class and perhaps become part of an interdisciplinary course. It is suggested that this unit be used over a four to six week period. However, a classroom teacher may opt to devote a longer or shorter time to the material presented. Because of the scope of this unit, I have only focused on several folktales but the suggested student bibliography contains a wealth of stories.

In addition, I have chosen folktales about women largely because they have been frequently bypassed in studies of Chinese history or culture. They were often seen as only incidental to Chinese studies and not as an important force in Chinese history. It is my hope that students will come to see that women who have been the largest disinherited group in China and all but written out of the traditional Chinese history texts, could gain notoriety and acclaim through the legends and folktales which were passed on orally.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will be able to identify the elements of a folktale plot, narrator, character, theme and/or moral. In addition to understanding the meanings of the terminology, they will be able to discuss and write about these terms in relation to individual folktales.
2. Students will be able to make comparisons between two or more stories on the basis of the terminology given in objective number one. They will be required to do this orally and in writing.
3. Students will be asked to apply what they have learned about Chinese social customs and traditions in the lectures and reading to their interpretation of the folktales. They will be expected to apply their acquired knowledge of Chinese culture to their understanding of the events, character motivation and theme in a particular story.
4. Students will develop a broad overview of Chinese culture based on the factual material presented and begin to eliminate some previous stereotypes about Chinese culture and people.

## Strategies

In addition to providing students with enjoyable reading, these selected folktales will point up every society's need to inculcate its members with the values, mores and attitudes of the culture. Classroom discussions and activities are designed to give students some understanding of the folktale as a medium through which values and beliefs are transmitted. As a beginning point, students will be introduced to Chinese history through lectures and selected readings that have been included in the bibliography.

It is my intention to use the Yale-China Association as a resource. They can provide films and other materials which could prove fascinating to the student. Having a speaker come in will also prove helpful in whetting the students' appetite for the folktales which will follow. Teachers are encouraged to draw upon area resources in order to provide students with background information about Chinese history and culture.

The folktales will be discussed in class and literal and interpretive questions will be assigned in order to frame the discussion. Initially, one or two folktales will be read aloud in class to better acquaint students with the fact that folktales were first told orally by a storyteller. It would be helpful to select those students to read orally who can do so with expression and animation or for the teacher to read a few tales to the class.

Throughout the course, the folktale presented will parallel some fact or information concerning customs, traditions or anecdotes which relate to Chinese women.

Students will be assigned essays in which they will be required to relate information about women's roles in traditional Chinese culture to particular stories. In addition to a unit exam, students will be required to write their own Chinese folktale, one which reflects the traditional view of women. It will be essential to make provisions for weekly quizzes in order to insure that students are doing the assigned reading at home and to ascertain how well they understand the literal and thematic material presented in the unit.

## Course Content

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The traditional role of women in Chinese society was one of subservience and humility. Chinese folklore is peppered with such phrases as "girls are maggots in the rice," "it is more profitable to raise geese than daughters." Females were considered dispensable; it was the birth of a son that was cause for celebration. Chinese girls were more likely than boys to suffer infanticide in poor families. An early marriage which had been arranged by the female's parents made a girl's stay in her parents house short-lived. There was the attitude that nothing need be done to enrich the intellect or existence of the female since after her marriage she would take up residence with her husband's parents. A daughter was referred to as an outsider because she would no longer bring any economic benefit to the family.

Dennis Bloodworth's *The Chinese Looking Glass* contains two very informative and easy to read chapters on the role of women in traditional China. He elucidates the Chinese customs surrounding marriage and the role of women in the home. These selections are important in helping students to understand the importance of tradition and custom in Chinese culture and how the entire Chinese society was structured to keep women in an inferior position. The two chapters contain terminology which will be useful to students' understanding of women in traditional Chinese culture. (See Sample Lesson 1.) For a firsthand account of the tyranny of the Chinese attitude toward women and its impact, *The Woman Warrior* is must reading for students. Teachers may use their own discretion as to whether they wish students to read all or parts of the book. The author, a

first generation Chinese American, writes of her parents' folk beliefs, traditions and views of life and how they affected her. Her mother, who returned to medical school in the Orient after the age of thirty, is a strong symbol in the author's life. The novel also acquaints students with the power of the oral tradition as a way of keeping a culture's folklore alive. Students should read the first chapter "No Name Woman" for it begins with the author's (also the narrator) mother telling her a family story which has been kept a secret. The story details the horrors of a young woman who becomes pregnant out of wedlock and throws herself and her newborn baby to the bottom of the well after her family's home is vandalized by outraged and avenging villagers.

Suicide by Chinese women was not uncommon. The pressures of an unhappy arranged marriage, a tyrannical and sometimes cruel mother-in-law or simply the burdens of life were often the causes. The stark reality of the narrator's aunt's suicide is in sharp contrast to the sentimental and romantic side of Chinese womanhood. The popular notion that the Chinese maiden and her lover killed themselves because a marriage was forbidden did not represent the reality. Few, if any, young men or women disobeyed their parents' marriage choice. However, this myth found its way into many of the folktales and into Chinese holidays. Even the origin of the Feast of Hungry Ghosts and All Souls Night of China lies in the sad little tale of two disconsolate lovers who, separated by disapproving parents, flung themselves in a river and drowned.

The folktale, "Faithful Even in Death," reflects the inability of women to get a formal education in China without resorting to deceit and depicts the romanticized notion of two lovers who take their lives in order to attain eternal love.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why was it necessary for Yingt'ai to disguise herself as a boy in order to be able to go away to school?
2. What might her disguise suggest about a woman's ability to get an education in traditional Chinese society?
3. What things did Yingt'ai do while at school in order to conceal her femaleness?
4. How did Yingt'ai's sister respond when Yingt'ai expressed her love for Hsienpo?
5. How did Hsienpo learn that Yingt'ai had been disguised as a male?
6. Why do you think that up until this point, Hsienpo did not realize that Yingt'ai was his childhood friend?
7. Describe Yingt'ai's actions on the day of her arranged marriage day.
8. How did the couple attain eternal love?
9. Would Yingt'ai have been allowed the opportunity to become a scholar or government official had she not taken her life?
10. Which is the romantic tale, "Faithful Even in Death" or "No Name Woman"? Explain your answer.
11. Could "No Name Woman" also have been titled "Faithful Even in Death" because the aunt refuses to name the man who impregnated her? Explain your answer.

The superstitions, legends and customs of China are fascinating. They abound in the supernatural. It was a common practice for rural women to give birth in pigsties in order to fool the jealous gods who do not snatch piglets but newborn babies. (The Chinese explanation of crib death perhaps.) Some of the folklore which surrounded Chinese beliefs about birth is recounted in the chapter "Shaman," from *The Woman Warrior*.

Resorting to her “talk-story,” the narrator’s mother, Brave Orchid, tells her daughter of her experiences as a doctor, midwife and “exorcist,” in a tiny village in Canton. “Shaman” is a spellbinding tale which weaves together many of the folk beliefs of traditional China. There is a vivid account of young girls being sold as slaves because their families can no longer feed them. There is also a reference to the common practice of a midwife or relative preparing a box of clean ashes beside the birth-bed if the newborn were a baby girl. If that were the case the baby’s face might be turned in the ashes and smothered.

Students will also be intrigued by the ghost stories which Brave Orchid tells in “Shaman” as well as the many references to rural folk beliefs and customs.

The folktale, “The Infection” is based upon the actual folk custom of ritual defloration of young girls. Ritual defloration is still widely known in South China, Southeast Asia and the Tibetan-Chinese border areas. The ritual also follows the custom of premarital freedom until the end of the first pregnancy. The second child is regarded as the first “real child.” In this tale it is the custom for a grown up girl to lie with a man before her marriage. The first man who sleeps with her receives the poison in her body and in a short time dies. The young heroine in this story refuses to sleep with a potential victim so she in turn falls violently ill. The folktale is a reflection of a rather negative view of women.

### Discussion Questions

1. Where is the setting for this story?
2. Why did Ma agree to sleep with the girl?
3. Why do you think the girl sacrificed her life for Ma?
4. Why, in this story, is it considered shameful for young girls to be chaste? (From what you know about Chinese culture is there anything odd about this?)
5. Why do you think the father was very shamed and angry at having a daughter who was chaste?
6. Whom does the girl encounter when she becomes ill?
7. How is the girl made well?
8. Why is it the belief in this story that the man to whom a young girl gives up her virginity becomes ill and dies?
9. What attitude toward women might be conveyed by this tale. Explain your answer.

There is the myth that all women in traditional China were passive and unambitious. However, the history of China negates this. The courtesan was perhaps the only truly free woman in China. She could use her wit, talent and beauty to gain political advantage. Although China was predominately a man’s world, there were times when a woman was the actual power behind the throne; occasionally she was the sovereign. In the chapter “More Gentle Sex” from *The Chinese Looking Glass*, Bloodworth gives a vivid account of the ruthless ambitions of such well-known concubines as Wu Cha, who masterminded several plots in order to become supreme empress. Twelve hundred years later, she was followed by Tzu Hsi, another woman with strong ambitions.

Students will be intrigued by the descriptions of their bloody deeds and acts of violence that will rival any drive-in horror movie. Seemingly docile, modest and demure, the Chinese woman treated her husband with silence and deference but knew how to use every weapon she could lay her hands on in order to remain

mistress in her own house. If her husband was infatuated with her, she might sell her favors for greater powers. If he was a fool, she would start keeping his accounts, then advise, then manage him. <sup>3</sup> Such is the case in the well-known folktale, "The Clever Wife." There were quite a few Han folktales about a clever woman where as the man was a dullard, or at least no match for her. As a wife, mother or mother-in-law, the woman frequently exerted a powerful influence on the family. In "The Clever Wife," the woman outwits the local magistrate and thus saves her husband from severe punishment.

### Discussion Questions

1. To what did the man in the story attribute his happiness?
2. What did the man do to glorify his wife?
3. Why did the magistrate send two officials to the master of the house?
4. Why was the magistrate upset with what he saw?
5. What three things did the magistrate require of the man?
6. What advice did the clever woman give her husband?
7. Why did the magistrate believe that the man had obtained information from the wife?
8. Apply the German proverb "A woman is indispensable to a man's happiness" to the folktale "The Clever Woman."
9. What do you think is the moral of this story?

Even as a daughter, Chinese women could be forceful. One such instance was the famed heroine, Mu Lan. Unusually skillful and clever with a sword, she went to war instead of her ailing father. He, having no sons, trained her since childhood in the martial arts. General Mu Lan was offered the hand of an emperor's daughter as a reward for twelve years of outstanding military service. This honor obliged General Lan to confess that he was really a she.

The heroic deeds of the swordswoman Mu Lan are recounted in "White Tigers" from *The Woman Warrior*. The narrator conjures up a vivid image of this woman after one of her mother's "talk story." The chapter depicts Mu Lan's prowess in battle and her endurance. The language and imagery are immensely powerful. This section will appeal to high school student's love of the fantastic and their fascination with the martial arts.

No doubt students will be curious about the current status of women in China. This is an issue which should be discussed with your students. Old habits die hard and much the same can be said for the beliefs and attitudes toward women in China that have had a stronghold for centuries. As long as folktales continue to be told in China and neighbors banter about old wives' tales and superstitions, women will probably remain second class citizens in China.

When the Communists came to their revolution, they moved quickly to win the favor of this very large and politically, socially and economically disinherited group by implementing certain policies. They gave women total emancipation and the right to participate in productive labor. Consequently, in the countryside, women now work in the fields but they are usually assigned the most backbreaking labor. The stereotypes about women not needing an education because they will simply move away after marriage still persist in rural areas. Villagers still refer to girl babies as "a thousand ounces of gold"; but a boy child is called "ten thousand ounces of gold."

The chapter “Holding Up Half the Sky” from Butterfield’s *China Alive in the Bitter Sea* should be read by students to give them a sense of what life is like for many women in Contemporary China. The power of the folk tradition may be brought home to them when, after reading this selection, they realize that the attitudes toward women which were reflected in the folktales still exist in China today.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Dundes, ed., *The Study of Folklore*. (New Jersey, 1965), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, ed., *African Folktales-Traditional Stories of the Black World*. (New York, 1983), p. xvi.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Bloodworth, *The Chinese Looking Glass*. (New York, 1966), p. 96.

## Lesson Plan #1

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After reading “The Female of the Species” (chapter 8) and “More Gentle Sex” (chapter 9) from *Chinese Looking Glass* define each of the following terms.

1. footbinding
2. dowry
3. concubine
4. bride-money
5. Yang Kuei-Fei
6. chastity
7. eunuch
8. Confucius
9. polygamy
10. courtesan

## Lesson Plan #2

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In “Shaman” there is a reference to the selling of females into slavery and the killing of baby girls. Explain why the society did not value the lives of females. As part of your explanation, state why infanticide may have been considered a necessary action on the part of a Chinese mother.

*or*

Write an essay from the point of view of a Chinese mother in which she explains why it was necessary for her to allow her three-month-old infant daughter to be sold as a servant to a wealthy merchant and his family.

## Student Bibliography

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Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior* . New York, 1976.

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## Teacher Bibliography

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Bloodworth, Dennis. *The Chinese Looking Glass*. New York, 1966.

An illuminating book about China and what makes its people tick. Fascinating.

Bonavia, David. *The Chinese* . New York, 1980.

A fascinating and intimate view of a people caught up in the most massive revolution in history.

Butterfield, Fox. *China Alive in the Bitter Sea* . New York, 1982.

Through anecdotes and profiles, Butterfield reexamines many of the clichés about China.

Dundee, Alan, ed. *The Study of Folklore*. New Jersey, 1965.

A collection of essays on folklore. This informative and insightful book will prove helpful to the classroom teacher.

Dyer, Thiselton T. F. *Folklore of Women*. Chicago, 1960.

An examination of proverbs about women that have come from different cultures.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior* . New York, 1976.

A first generation Chinese American woman's account of her mother's life in China in the 1920s.



Spence, Jonathan D. *The Gate of Heavenly Peace The Chinese and their Revolution, 1895-1980*. New York, 1981.

This informative book follows the story of the Chinese revolution from the 1800s to the present.

Von Franz, Marie Louen. *Problems of the Feminine in Folktales* . New York, 1972.

This book examines women as symbols in literature from a psychological perspective.

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