

## Women in China ca. 1200-1450

Women are often marginalized in the historical record. The two sources we will look at today reflect attitudes concerning women in China from ca. 600-1450 CE.

After reading the introductions to the sources and the sources themselves below, discuss in your small group the following:

1. What historical concepts or cultural aspects do you see reflected in the two documents?
2. How do these two sources represent the gender roles of China?
3. What do these two documents tell us about Tang and Song China?

We will share out as a class after your small group discussions!

### The Ballad of Mulan (Ode of Mulan)

The introduction and excerpt used below are from <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/china/mulan.pdf>

#### Introduction

The basis for this poem is thought to be “Lady Fu Hao” from the Shang Dynasty, but that is not known for sure. She was a concubine in the emperor’s household who, based on inscriptions, fought in wars to critical acclaim.

The Ballad of Mulan itself, as a poem, was composed in the fifth or sixth century CE. At the time, China was divided between north and south. The rulers of the northern dynasties were from non-Han ethnic groups, most of them from Turkic peoples such as the Toba (Tuoba, also known as Xianbei), whose Northern Wei dynasty ruled most of northern China from 386 – 534. This background explains why the character Mulan refers to the Son of Heaven as “Khan” —the title given to rulers among the pastoral nomadic people of the north, including the Xianbei—one of the many reasons why the images conveyed in the movie “Mulan” of a stereotypically Confucian Chinese civilization fighting against the barbaric “Huns” to the north are a bit inaccurate.

It was first recorded before the Sui Dynasty, but that source was lost to history. The next time it was recorded was in the Song Dynasty in a source called *Music Bureau Collection*. The author cited the source from the Sui Dynasty, which is how we know about it even though the original source was lost.

Tsiek tsiek and again tsiek tsiek,  
Mulan weaves, facing the door.  
You don't hear the shuttle's sound,  
You only hear Daughter's sighs.  
They ask Daughter who's in her heart,  
They ask Daughter who's on her mind.  
"No one is on Daughter's heart,  
No one is on Daughter's mind.  
Last night I saw the draft posters,  
The Khan is calling many troops,  
The army list is in twelve scrolls,  
On every scroll there's Father's name.  
Father has no grown-up son,  
Mulan has no elder brother.  
I want to buy a saddle and horse,  
And serve in the army in Father's place."

In the East Market she buys a spirited horse,  
In the West Market she buys a saddle,  
In the South Market she buys a bridle,  
In the North Market she buys a long whip.  
At dawn she takes leave of Father and Mother,  
In the evening camps on the Yellow River's bank.  
She doesn't hear the sound of Father and Mother calling,  
She only hears the Yellow River's flowing water cry tsien tsien.

She doesn't hear the sound of Father and Mother calling,  
She only hears Mount Yen's nomad horses cry tsiu tsiu.  
She goes ten thousand miles on the business of war,  
She crosses passes and mountains like flying.  
Northern gusts carry the rattle of army pots,  
Chilly light shines on iron armor.  
Generals die in a hundred battles,  
Stout soldiers return after ten years.

On her return she sees the Son of Heaven,  
The Son of Heaven sits in the Splendid Hall.  
He gives out promotions in twelve ranks  
And prizes of a hundred thousand and more.  
The Khan asks her what she desires.  
"Mulan has no use for a minister's post.  
I wish to ride a swift mount  
To take me back to my home."

When Father and Mother hear Daughter is coming  
They go outside the wall to meet her, leaning on each other.  
When Elder Sister hears Younger Sister is coming  
She fixes her rouge, facing the door.  
When Little Brother hears Elder Sister is coming  
He whets the knife, quick quick, for pig and sheep.  
"I open the door to my east chamber,  
I sit on my couch in the west room,  
I take off my wartime gown  
And put on my old-time clothes."  
Facing the window she fixes her cloudlike hair,  
Hanging up a mirror she dabs on yellow flower powder  
She goes out the door and sees her comrades.  
Her comrades are all amazed and perplexed.  
Traveling together for twelve years  
They didn't know Mulan was a girl.  
"The he-hare's feet go hop and skip,  
The she-hare's eyes are muddled and fuddled.  
Two hares running side by side close to the ground,  
How can they tell if I am he or she?"

## Excerpts from *The Analects for Women* by Song Ruo Zhao (618–907)

The introduction and excerpt used below are from [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/song\\_ruo Zhao\\_analects.pdf](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/song_ruo Zhao_analects.pdf)

*Although Song Ruo Zhao, a daughter of a high-ranking official in the Tang dynasty (618–907), is listed as the author of the text, some scholars believe her sister Ruohua was the one who wrote it. Ruo Zhao remained single and became a female scholar in the court of Emperor Dezong of the late eighth century. She was responsible for instructing the royal princesses.*

### **Establishing Oneself as a Person**

To be a woman, you must first learn to establish yourself as a person. The way to do this is simply by working hard to establish one's purity and chastity. By purity, one keeps one's self-undefiled; by chastity, one preserves one's honor.

When walking, don't turn your head; when talking, don't open your mouth wide; when sitting, don't move your knees; when standing, don't rustle your skirts; when happy, don't exult with loud laughter; when angry, don't raise your voice. The inner and outer quarters are each distinct; the sexes should be segregated. Don't peer over the outer wall or go beyond the outer courtyard. If you have to go outside, cover your face; if you peep outside, conceal yourself as much as possible. Do not be on familiar terms with men outside the family; have nothing to do with women of bad character. Establish your proper self so as to become a [true] human being.

### **Serving a Husband**

Women leave their families to marry, and the husband is the master of the household [they marry into].... The husband is to be firm, the wife soft: conjugal affections follow from this. While at home, the two of you should treat each other with the formality and reserve of a guest. Listen carefully to and obey whatever your husband tells you. If he does something wrong, gently correct him. Don't be like those women who not only do not correct their husbands but actually lead them into indecent ways.... Don't imitate those shrewish wives who love to clash head on with their husbands all the time. Take care of your husband's clothing so that he is never cold in winter, and of his meals so that he never gets thin and sickly from not being fed enough. As a couple, you and your husband share the bitter and the sweet, poverty and riches. In life you share the same bed; in death the same grave....

### **Instructing Sons and Daughters**

Most all families have sons and daughters. As they grow and develop, there should be a definite sequence and order in their education. But the authority/responsibility to instruct them rests solely with the mother. . . . Daughters remain behind in the women's quarters and should not be allowed to go out very often. . . . Teach them sewing, cooking, and etiquette. . . . Don't allow them to be indulged, lest they throw tantrums to get their own way; . . .

Worthy of derision are those who don't take charge of their responsibility [in this area]. The sons of such women remain illiterate, they poke fun at their elders, they get into fights and drink way too much, and they become addicted to singing and dancing. . . . They bring shame on their honorable relatives and disgrace on their father and mother. Mothers who fail to raise their children correctly are as if they had raised pigs and rats!